$3

January 4, 2026

Tribune file photo

Demolition work at the former Overton factory is shown above in 2015. The condemned factory building was demolished by the city of South Haven, which plans to use the site for affordable housing.

A boom in housing

SWMI on the cusp of adding significant housing projects

By **LAUREN RICE** and **LOUISE WREGE**
HP Staff Writers
and **JULIE NEWELL**
SH Tribune Editor

Julie Newell / Tribune file photo

Dwelling Place representatives speak during a community engagement meeting in October, where they presented updates on the Overton development project and answered questions from the community.

Municipalities in Berrien, Cass and Van Buren counties are working to bring in housing projects amid a national and statewide housing shortage.

Housing of all types is in demand, from single-family homes and apartment complexes to senior living communities and workforce housing.

In 2025, there's been progress on a number of housing developments, as well as efforts by localities to make their cities, townships and villages places that are attractive for developers to do their work.

Cornerstone Alliance Community Development Director Andrew Haan said a pro-development posture from municipalities, along with a market case to come and invest, is part of what is attracting additional developments.

"This is happening in every corner of the county, and it's a little different in every part of the county, too," he said. "There's projects being worked on in Watevliet and a bunch in Benton Harbor, New Buffalo, New Buffalo Township. It's happening everywhere."

Haan said development has been picking up momentum over this past year, but demand isn't static either. Additional residents create or draw more businesses, driving further development and attracting more potential residents.

Cornerstone Alliance President and CEO Marla Schneider referenced a "developer day" event held in October, where developers and other interested parties were given a tour of municipalities and potential sites for future projects.

"Anything we can do to bring developers into our community and showcase the available opportunities for them, I think we're seeing success from that," she said. "A lot of it is just putting Berrien County on the map for people and knowing we're a friendly community to work with and do projects in."

Dan Fette, community development director for Berrien County, said there is a need for housing in the county as well as the rest of Southwest Michigan. Although the county's population has decreased, Fette said told the Berrien County board during an August meeting there has been an increase in ownership of second homes, leaving the county's middle class households in need of affordable housing.

Further, he said more than 50 percent of the homes in Berrien County were built before 1970, leading to an aging housing stock.

There are several developers who have noticed Southwest Michigan and its demand for housing. As the affected communities look ahead to 2026, here's a breakdown of the projects moving forward this year.

South Haven

South Haven made headway in 2025 on the growing need for affordable housing.

See **HOUSING**, page A3

LMC board to launch gig worker program

Certificate aimed to prep students for freelance roles

By **RALPH HEIBUTZKI**
Paxton Media Group

BENTON TOWNSHIP — With gig workers expected to outnumber their traditional counterparts by 2027, Lake Michigan College is rolling out a new program to meet that demand.

LMC's new gig economy certificate will prepare students for contract, freelance, hybrid and small business work – by giving them practical skills in business operations, communications, finance and marketing, said Ken Flowers, executive vice president.

"This certificate provides a short-term, workforce-ready pathway that responds directly to employer feedback, labor market trends, and LMC's mission to offer relevant, adaptable education supporting economic mobility in Southwest Michigan," he said.

LMC board members approved creating the new program last week. The college plans to roll it out in the fall.

A gig worker is a person who does temporary or freelance work, usually on an informal or on-demand basis.

About 36 percent of U.S. workers currently participate in gig work, a number that's expected to hit 51 percent by 2027, said Flowers, in an outline for the board.

Trends driving demand for gig work include mass layoffs – credited with a 67 percent growth in new business startups – and an expanding use of flexible workers, which 80 percent of large corporations are now pursuing, he said.

About 37 percent of freelancers also report increasing demand for their services, figures show.

Students will earn the certificate as part of LMC's Applied Associate in Business program, which will be aimed at students preparing for contract or freelance roles; gig workers needing formal business skills, or working adults transitioning to gig income; and students in non-business fields planning to work independently, Flowers said.

"Regional and national data show increasing demand for flexible workers, rising freelance opportunities, and growth in small business start-ups driven by economic shifts. Students pursuing gig or independent work need immediately applicable business skills that traditional programs do not always address," he said.

See **GIG WORKER**, page A2

Michigan's death doulas bring solace to those navigating the end of life

By **ELI NEWMAN**
Bridge Michigan

Kimberly Wamba realized what she wanted to do with her life in watching members of her family die.

She always had a desire to help people, a desire that started in childhood watching her grandmother work as an aide.

"My grandma used to go to different clients' homes and take care of them," Wamba told Bridge Michigan. "I really admired what she did."

Wamba would earn a doctorate in information technology. But she took on a new role when her father got sick, returning to Michigan to help ease him through his "threshold of death" as he succumbed to illness.

"The very day of his death, I was able to be at his bedside, and I was able to hold him and look directly into his eyes," Wamba said. "While I didn't know anything about being a doula at that time, that experience stuck with me."

Her father's death led Wamba toward her work as a death doula – a wide-ranging, usually non-medical role that assists individuals and their families navigate dying – joining a small, but growing number of people in Michigan and nationally who have pursued roles in providing "death care." The goal, Wamba said, is to fix a "broken" system of services for people at the end of their life.

"For me, being a death doula is basically like somebody who walks with someone during that process of moving through transition, whether that be at the time when they're closest to death, or even quite a bit before than," Wamba explained.

Now the president and founder of the Metro Detroit-based non-profit Sacred Life Care Initiative, Wamba is able to work with those at a critical juncture between life and death.

See **DEATH DOULAS**, page A5

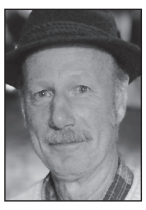
The Tribune: Celebrating Our 127th Year

Support the Local Businesses Who Help Support Our Community!

OBITUARIES

Ronald Klug

Sept. 18, 1952 – Dec. 29, 2025



Ronald Allen Klug, 73, went to be with his Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ on Dec. 29, 2025 at his home in South Haven, Mich.

Ron was born at Memorial Hospital in St. Joseph, Mich. to Richard and Joyce (Young) Klug on Sept. 18, 1952. He attended Mount Pleasant School while helping out on the family farm in Sodus harvesting strawberries, tomatoes and grapes. He graduated from Benton Harbor High School in 1970 followed by Kalamazoo College earning a degree in chemistry in 1974.

Following graduation, he started his career at the Northwest Indiana Criminology and Toxicology Laboratory in Gary, Ind. After moving to South Haven to join Wycoff Chemical Company, he stayed in the same lab while outlasting Wycoff, Catalytica, DSM Pharmaceutical and finally retiring from Albemarle in 2018.

He was a servant of the Lord throughout his life in churches within Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod primarily of St. Paul's, Sodus; Our Shepherd, Crown Point, Ind.; and St. Paul, South Haven.

Ron and JoAnn Gerencser Froehlich married on Feb. 12, 1977 in St. Paul's Lutheran Church by Pastor Henry Peter. The first nine years of marriage were spent in Valparaiso, Ind., before moving to South Haven. They enjoyed over 48 years of adventures together, raising four children.

Countless hours were spent at sporting events, band concerts, horse shows and driving to and from each event. Maintaining home, store and apartment house consumed the remainder of his free time.

Ron was a lifelong baseball fan, always rooting for the Orioles – good years and bad. He started playing sandlot ball in country grade schools. Later in life, he played in adult softball leagues and for the vintage baseball team, Douglas Dutchers. He also relaunched the Barkpeelers vintage baseball club in South Haven with his close friend, Rick Olsen.

In retirement, his analytical skillset was used to research and find other 1970 BHHS classmates and teachers. In this way, he prepared for their 50th and 55th class reunions which he thoroughly enjoyed.

Ron is survived by his wife, JoAnn of South Haven; children, Suzannah (Alex) Deneau of Benton Harbor; Lillie (Vinod) Ponnusamy of Seattle, Wash.; John (Tristan) Klug of Fairbanks, Alaska; and Alexandra (Sergio) Ramos Klug of Coloma, Mich.; nine grandchildren, Carolyn Deneau, Vincent Deneau, Jordi Ponnusamy, Carson Deneau, Petra Ponnusamy, Wilder Klug, Santiago Ramos Klug, Flora Klug, and Diego Ramos Klug; mother, Joyce Klug of St. Joseph; brother, Rick (Rachel) Klug of St. Joseph; sisters Stella Strasser of Styer, Austria and Cynthia (Ron) Kucharzyk of Stevensville, Mich.; brothers-in-law John (Linda) Gerencser and Steven (Elaine) Gerencser; and many cousins, nieces and nephews.

He was preceded in death by his father, Richard Klug, sister-in-law Elaine Gerencser Case, in-laws, Bill and Pat Gerencser, and Mickey Gerencser, his grandparents, aunts, uncles and cousins.

Family and friends may call from 5 to 7 p.m. on Friday, Jan. 2, 2026 at Filbrandt Chapel, 1076 S. Bailey Avenue, South Haven, MI or 10 to 11 a.m. on Saturday at St. Paul Lutheran Church at 718 Arbor Court, South Haven, MI.

A celebration of life service will be held at 11 a.m. on Saturday, Jan. 3 at St. Paul Lutheran Church, officiated by Pastor Stephen Daley.

Memorials may be made to St. Paul Lutheran Church in South Haven or the Melanoma Research Foundation.

To those who choose to leave a memory or condolence go to www.starksfamilyfh.com.

Arrangements have been entrusted to Filbrandt Chapel Starks Family Funeral Homes and Cremation Services 269-637-0333.

GIG WORKER

From page A1

The program will focus around one-credit courses in customer service, finance, marketing, professionalism and small business management. They'll also tie in with workshop and mentoring opportunities, as needed.

Cardiac sonography

The board also approved creating new programs in cardiac sonography and studio art.

Cardiac sonographers run the equipment for creating detailed images of the heart's function, and guide the diagnosis and treatment of conditions like blood clots, for example.

LMC is adding the program in response to clinical partners, including Corewell Health, who are relying on temporary workers to ease a shortage of sonographers, Flowers said.

"With the recent expansion of the sonography suite, the college now has the instructional and clinical capacity to add this high-need specialization," he said.

Although there are 200 accredited programs offered nationwide, just six are in Michigan – and even then, it's not enough to meet the demand, Flowers said.

Major causes include pandemic-related attrition, retirements, workplace injuries, "and rising volumes of cardiac imaging, due to an aging population and structural heart interventions," he told the board.

The U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics expects demand for sonographers to grow 15 percent by 2034. About 55,000 work nationwide.

"The need for a cardiac sonography program is compelling, data-supported, and strongly reinforced by clinical partners," Flowers said. "LMC is well-positioned to address this regional workforce shortage."

Studio art

LMC's studio art program will prepare students transferring to bachelor of arts, or bachelor of fine arts (BFA) programs – through foundational coursework in art history, drawing, painting, sculpture and design, as well as portfolio development, Flowers said.

"It also supports undecided students seeking a structured immersion in foundational art and design to prepare for a range of creative career pathways," he said.

Arts and cultural employment totaled 5.4 million jobs, with pay rising in 43 states, figures show.

Such activity also represented 4.2 percent of U.S. gross domestic product in 2023, or $1.17 trillion, according to the U.S. Bureau of Economic Analysis.

"As creative industries contribute more significantly to national and state economic output, the college is positioned to support both student success and regional cultural vitality," Flowers said. "Establishing the studio art program strengthens LMC's degree offerings and meets rising student and workforce demand."

Bronson Healthcare honors providers with annual award

By TRIBUNE STAFF

SOUTH HAVEN — Bronson Healthcare recently honored four providers with the 2025 Compassionate Physician/Advanced Practice Provider of the Year Award.

According to a news release, this annual recognition celebrates clinicians who exemplify empathy and compassion in caring for patients and families.

"Compassion in healthcare means more than understanding," Bronson Pediatric Critical Care Specialists and Bronson's Provider Wellness Committee Chair Michelle Halley, MD said in the release. "It's about taking meaningful steps to ease the burden of those we serve."

This year's honorees include one physician and three advanced practice providers, nominated and chosen by their peers including:

- Sonya Datta-Sandhu, CNM – Bronson Obstetrics, Gynecology and Midwifery Specialists in Kalamazoo and South Haven.
- Susan Heinrich, MD – Bronson LakeView Family Care, Blue Star in South Haven.
- Katie Moratti, NP – Bronson Vascular and Endovascular Surgery Specialists in Battle Creek.
- Cara Herman, CRNA – Bronson Medical Staff provider – Kalamazoo Anesthesiology, PC.

DATTA-SANDHU

HEINRICH

MORATTI

HERMAN

"This year's honorees consistently go above and beyond to provide comfort and hope to patients and families during their most vulnerable moments," Halley said. "Their commitment to compassionate care is what makes Bronson truly exceptional and I am deeply grateful to work alongside such dedicated professionals."

The Compassionate Physician and Advanced Practice Provider of the Year Awards are made possible through donors to Bronson Health Foundation, including:

- Gretchen LaReau Memorial Fund at the Kalamazoo Community Foundation
- Bronson Battle Creek Hospital Community Partners
- Bernice DeHaan Memorial Donor Advised Fund

For more information go to bronsonhealth.us/compassionate-awards-fund.

PICTURE PERFECT

Don Campbell / PMG staff

A photographer frames an image of an ice-covered outer lighthouse Tuesday morning at Silver Beach in St. Joseph.

Berrien Springs police chief to retire in March

Toliver will teach at LMC police academy

By DEBRA HAIGHT
Paxton Media Group

BERRIEN SPRINGS — Next year will bring changes to the Berrien Springs-Oronoko Township Police Department, as current Police Chief Paul Toliver has announced his retirement.

His last day as chief will be March 31, 2026.

"Serving our community and leading the men and women of this department has been a great privilege both professionally and personally," he wrote in his retirement letter. "The Berrien Springs-Oronoko Township Police Department has faced challenges while making achievements and upholding the integrity and accountability necessary to be a great agency our community can be proud of."

Toliver said he wanted to extend his deepest gratitude to the Oronoko Township board, the officers and the community for their trust over the last decade.

"The quality of our officers gives me confidence in our department's continued success and its commitment to public safety," he said.

As he gets ready to retire, Toliver said he's looking forward to spending more time with his family who have supported him throughout his career and pursuing personal interests while continuing to support the local community.

Toliver said he plans to teach at the Lake Michigan College Police Academy and continue giving back to the job in any other ways he is able to do. He said he hasn't made a formal decision on whether to run for reelection to the Berrien Springs school board this November. He has served on that board since 2007.

"While I still have a passion for the job, I view myself as part of a 'continuum' in the law enforcement community," he said. "The success of law enforcement in Berrien Springs-Oronoko Township and Berrien County in general far outweighs any individual accolades.

"Our relationship with other Berrien County law enforcement agencies is very strong," he added. "Most of all, I appreciate the men and women I have had the honor of working with for the past 37 years. Law enforcement is a 'calling' and the support from these people I have received has been beyond measure."

Toliver's long career in law enforcement has included more than 25 years with the Berrien County Sheriff's Department and the last 10 years with Berrien Springs. During his tenure with the sheriff's department, he rose from being a deputy to the ranks of sergeant, lieutenant and captain.

At Berrien Springs, he has performed administrative, managerial and supervisory duties and overseen a $1.4 million budget. He has assisted with contract negotiations with the Fraternal Order of Police and worked to continually develop community, school and church relationships.

Toliver is a native of Hart, Mich., and attended Hope College and Muskegon Community College before getting his bachelor's degree in criminal justice from Michigan State University.

As for the search for his successor, Oronoko Township Supervisor Mike Hildebrand said the position will be posted in January with the goal of interviewing candidates in February. He said the goal is to have someone in place and ready to go by April 1.

Al-Van Humane Society
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Meet Roary, the king of the kitten room jungle! At 9 months old, he's now the oldest and biggest kitten in the room, and he's patiently watched all his younger kitten friends get adopted. Sweet, calm, and a little bit regal, Roary sometimes gets overlooked for the smaller, younger kittens, but he still has a heart as big as a lion's. When he's not bird-watching or napping in the sunny windowsill, Roary is practicing his best game face and perfecting his pounce. He gets along well with other cats but is just as happy doing his own thing. Roary is ready to join your home team and be the MVP of your heart!
Submit an adoption survey at al-van.org/adopt!

– FUR BALL 2026 –
Fur Ball 2026, Breakfast at Tiffany's, is fast approaching on February 21st. Put on your best Audrey Hepburn look and prepare for a glamorous night, including dinner, cash bar, live and silent auctions, and dueling pianos. To secure tickets, visit us online at al-van.org/furball. Spots are limited, and you don't want to miss out on what is sure to be the event of the season!

ANNUAL BOARD MEETING
Al-Van's Annual Board Meeting will take place on Thursday, January 15th at 6:00pm. The meeting will be held in the Adoption Center lobby and is open to the public.

THIS WEEK'S WISH LIST
Wet dog food and poop bags

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HOUSING

From page A1

One of the housing projects includes the 5.5-acre Overton property at 229 Elkenburg St.

According to the Michigan PFAS Action Response Team website, the property originally housed S.E. Overton Company which was built in the early 1900s. The S.E. Overton Company manufactured wooden molding, furniture, gun stocks and other specialty wood products.

In 1995, the property was bought and used as a rental property for warehousing and light manufacturing, including the manufacturing of tarps. The site was foreclosed on in 2006 and sat unused until the city bought and demolished the factory in 2015.

In 2021, the city hired The Habitat Company to redevelop the property into affordable housing. The Habitat Company withdrew their agreement with the city in 2023 and the project did not progress until 2024 when the city hired Dwelling Place to take over the project.

Dwelling Place's site plan for the project includes two components – multi-family rental and community land trust homeownership.

Phase one will focus on the multi-family renting component. The proposed plan is to have a three-story apartment building with 53 one- and two-bedroom apartments with 60 to 80 parking spots along with building amenities including a community room, rooftop garden and leasing office.

Phase two will focus on homeownership within the development. The proposal includes 20 total homes with 10 duplexes and two single-family homes. The homes will be two stories tall with three to four bedrooms, up to two bathrooms, a driveway and garage.

The final concept plans for phase two are not finalized yet and could change in the future.

Dwelling Place representatives will present their concept plans for approval for phase one to the South Haven Planning Commission during the Jan. 8 meeting.

If approved, the developers will send all the necessary paperwork to MSHDA and Low-Income Housing Tax Credit for funding approval on April 1.

St. Joseph

In a 2024 study in partnership with Cornerstone Alliance, the city of St. Joseph was told it needed to implement 900 housing units in the next four years to keep up with demand. In that pursuit, city officials have allowed forward motion on a number of projects, including The Marquette, Harbor Shores and a yet-to-be-named workforce housing development by Clark Logic.

City commissioners also tasked the planning commission with examining options for adopting a policy on accessory dwelling units (ADUs). Those could be another option for expanded diverse housing within the city, allowing homeowners to zone another housing unit on their property.

In the last five months, The Marquette project has been approved for the purchase of a public parking lot downtown, a brownfield plan and a height variance through the St. Joseph City Commission.

The project is being developed by The Rienks Group, which Director of Development Terry Malloy said next year will include ongoing architecture and engineering work on the project, as well as finalizing the financing.

"We're continuing the interviews with lenders, so for 2026 we're looking to select a lender, which we're fairly far along with two or three of the four we're speaking to, and also complete the equity raise," he said.

Malloy said the groundbreaking would happen around June.

The project would put a seven-story building on Lakeshore Drive between Broad and Pleasant streets, across from Lake Bluff Park. Plans include a ground floor for commercial use, three floors of apartments and three floors of condominiums totaling 100 residential units. It would also involve a two-story underground parking garage, with a number of dedicated public spaces to accommodate the spots lost in the purchase of the lot from the city.

According to the timeline presented by Malloy and TRG President Peter Rienks at a planning commission meeting in October, construction could be completed by 2028.

The Harbor Shores project on the North side of the St. Joseph River received PUD approval from the city commission at the end of August.

It is expected to come together in two phases over the course

Don Campbell / PMG file photo

Chris Cook, left, president and managing director of Harbor Shores Community Redevelopment, and Realtor Kerry Wright II talk about some of the future plans in the Harbor Shores development in April at Harbor Village in Benton Harbor.

Don Campbell / PMG file photo

A groundbreaking is held Sept. 30 for the Project T development located at the former site of Mercy Hospital at 960 Agard Ave. in Benton Harbor.

Don Campbell / PMG file photo

Construction continues in August on the Maiden Villas project, located along Maiden Lane in Royalton Township. Developer Greg Fenner's one-story condominiums are available to people ages 55 and over.

of 10 years. Phase one includes 105 housing units, with 200 or more planned in total, along with green spaces and recreation. The 19.5-acre section of land, split into multiple parcels and types of projects, revolves around the intersection of Upton and Whitwam drives, and the $150 million project has been years in the making.

Construction has already started, Harbor Shores Managing Director Chris Cook said. Eight units in a section called "Harbor Village" are completed, with six under construction.

"That development area is just about full," Cook said. "We've got ... about 15 left to go in there. And then, of course, we're going to do over 200 in parcel two."

In 2026, Cook said underground infrastructure work will start late in the first quarter, allowing construction to start on townhomes in late 2026 or early 2027.

Also happening in the city is a project at 2929 Lakeshore Drive. It's on a parcel adjacent to the building being renovated for mixed commercial use on Hilltop Road.

Clark Logic Director of Development Tim Monahan said the apartments will be the company's first housing project, but might not be the last. It's pushed forward by employer demands for workforce housing.

He said business tenants renting commercial space in the large industrial building are able to expand, but need more employees to do it.

"We're a nimble company, and if it makes sense, if this (housing project) goes well, I think we'd be looking for others," Monahan said. "We like the area, we've got over a million square feet in this region. It all goes back to what drives us, is the demand from our tenants."

The next steps in development, as of mid-December, require selecting a contractor to finalize the project's design and mix of unit types. Financial models will also soon be finished, Monahan said, and then they can move on to the brownfield plan.

"If we can get shovels in the ground (by) late spring, we're looking at a probably 14- to 18-month build," he said. "I think we can hit that late spring start date, which puts us in a pretty good spot."

Benton Harbor

Housing construction in Benton Harbor exploded in 2025, with dozens of the new residences slated to be available in 2026.

Benton Harbor Mayor Marcus Muhammad said the new homes fit in with the city's master plan, which calls for the city attracting 10,000 new residents by 2040.

"In order to do that, a housing

Don Ames / PMG file photo

The distinctive shape of the old Snowflake Motel in Lincoln Township still shows in this 2009 aerial photo of the hotel property. The building was demolished in 2006.

boom must start now," Muhammad said. "The good news is that we've already gotten started."

He pointed to the 46 apartments at the Corner at Wall Street and the 14 duplexes with 28 homes at Project T as examples of the housing growth. Both projects are expected to be ready for people to move to in 2026.

In addition, Muhammad said he's working with private developers to create the "Magical Mile" on Riverview Drive.

"It will consist of lofts, apartment units, condominiums, duplexes, commercial space, office space and retail and restaurants," he said.

Muhammad said all of this was made possible by the city's award-winning master plan, dubbed the "Best Benton Harbor Community Plan," which allows for more types of housing to be built.

The plan won the annual Daniel Burnham Award for a Comprehensive Plan from the Michigan Association of Planning in July.

Muhammad said the judges loved that one of the goals in the plan was to make the city "gentrification-proof."

For example, Muhammad said the city is in talks with developers who would like to bring tiny homes to the city.

"One of the things I have realized in my travels around the country and abroad is that thriving cities have the most diverse housing opportunities," he said. "When we limit housing alternatives, we cripple economic development and dissuade people from moving into our cities. ... If we do not adjust to the changing times, some cities will not exist in 50 years."

The master plan was approved by city commissioners in December of 2023.

Benton Harbor City Manager Alex Little said more work was done in the past two years to rezone parts of the city to make room for the expanded housing options such as bungalows, duplexes, triplexes and quads.

Instead of building one house on each lot, he said parts of existing neighborhoods were rezoned to include these options.

Little said the city has 450 vacant lots that are ready to be developed, with another 600 vacant lots owned by other people. In many cases, he said vacant lots could be combined for larger housing projects.

"I'm thinking that once the process really begins and people begin to see that new housing can function well in existing neighborhoods and that people can do well, I think it's going to take off," he said.

He said he's putting together pre-approved housing packages based on the plan to make it as easy as possible for developers and private individuals to build workforce housing in the city to help boost the population.

"All a person has to do is buy the package. They won't have to go through a lot of hoops and whatnot. All they have to do is identify where they want to put it," Little said.

The packages are expected to be ready early in 2026.

Little said building in Benton Harbor is a bargain because land is relatively inexpensive and all of the infrastructure is in place, including utilities and sidewalks, for a city that at one time had almost 20,000 residents.

"The alleys, streets and sidewalks are still there," he said. "... A lot of that isn't available in rural areas."

A development is also in the works for a restaurant and 16 condominiums at the former Chase Bank building at 400 Riverview Drive.

The site plan for the property overlooking the St. Joseph River was approved by the Benton Harbor Planning Commission in July 2024. The plans call for five condominiums on each of the floors two through four. The Chase Bank closed at that location in 2017.

Benton Township

In early December, Harbor Woods Townhomes announced the first round of luxury condominiums becoming available. At that point, interested potential residents could tour the units before the earliest possible move-in date of Jan. 1.

Another round of condos was set to become available in February.

According to a news release from the Southwest Michigan Regional Chamber, the units at Harbor Woods Townhomes are marketed toward executives, professionals and retirees looking to live close to employment centers and regional amenities.

Each of the planned units is intended to include a one- or two-car garage, three bedrooms, two-and-a-half bathrooms, in-unit laundry and modern appliances.

Lincoln Township

The site of the former Snowflake Motel on Red Arrow Highway is likely to be redeveloped into an apartment complex called Red Arrow Bluffs. The developer, Great Lakes Capital LLC, planned the first phase to include six apartment buildings with 200 total units.

In November, the project received PUD approval from the Lincoln Township Board of Trustees, and initial approval from the township's brownfield authority.

Trustees held a public hearing on the same brownfield plan in December, and are expected to vote on it in January.

As long as the other forms of financing come through, the project is a go, and could break ground in April or May at the earliest.

"What the housing TIF in this portion allows us to do is capture what we're really giving up, as compared to a market (rate) rent, and get that reimbursed through the TIF over time," GLC Development Associate Isaac Hall said when the brownfield board approved the plan.

The apartment buildings are planned for the half of the property closest to Red Arrow Highway. The second half is not formally approved, but will likely include 80 single-family homes and townhouses.

Royalton Township

Maiden Villas, a senior living community of 44 condominium units, has been under construction near Niles Road in Royalton Township for several months. But this project isn't the first of its kind by Fenner Homes, a development company run by Greg Fenner.

Before starting on Maiden Villas, Fenner finished Maiden Lane Cottages, a similar project of one-story condominiums available to people 55 and over in Lincoln Township. It filled up quickly, and the demand for that project prompted him to start another.

The two projects are less than a mile away from each other. Fenner said construction and sales will continue next year and he's hoping the economy stays stable while that happens.

"We close on our second one tomorrow, all our roads, infrastructure is in, and we're proceeding with completing the ones that are under construction," he said.

Maiden Villas has two units sold and eight under construction as of late December.

St. Joseph Township

The former Berrien Hills Golf Course in St. Joseph Township is being proposed as a housing project as well. Developed by The Ridge Group, it's planned to include – in at least the first phase – 180 rental units.

Of those, 120 would be at market-rate and 60 units would be income-restricted.

At a recent St. Joseph Township board meeting, developers said the land's current floodplains designation could affect future phases of the project. A brownfield plan for the project was approved by the township board and Berrien County officials in October.

According to Township Manager Denise Cook, the old clubhouse is intended to be demolished within the next three months, and construction on the first phase of the project will start in 2026.

Watervliet

A proposed $12.6 million housing development in Watervliet will move forward following action in August by the Berrien County Board of Commissioners.

The development, which is being called River Oaks South, will be built along River Oaks Drive just east of M-140 in Watervliet by Allen Edwin Homes. The developer has completed several housing projects throughout the Midwest.

River Oaks South will include 19 homes, four of which will be income-restricted rentals, and the remaining 15 will be sold at market rate. The brownfield plan now goes to the state for approval and, if successful, would be completed by the fall of 2027.

Under state law, brownfield status is allowed for a maximum of 30 years. The project in Watervliet is expected to exit brownfield status in 18 years. At that point, the increased property taxes will be applied, generating more money for the county, the local municipality and the school district.

Tim Sutherland, who serves as the Watervliet city manager and police chief, thanked the county board for its support of the project. The brownfield plan was previously approved by the Watervliet City Commission and the Berrien County Brownfield Authority.

Dowagiac

The Rienks Group – the same developers working on The Marquette project in St. Joseph – have other projects in the Southwest Michigan region.

One of the company's other projects is a building renovation at 234 S. Front St. in Dowagiac. Malloy said a three-story building in the downtown has The Wounded Minnow Saloon on the first floor, but the second and third floors have been vacant for two or three decades.

Built in 1913 as an Elks Lodge, it will soon have 10 apartments on the upper floors.

"We have a project that's actually in the midst of kicking off right now, which is a renovation of a 100-year-old, three-story building in Dowagiac that has an MEDC grant attached to it as well," Malloy said. "A lot of support from the community up there."

TRG already closed on the building and secured their loans and approvals. As of mid-December, asbestos abatement and demolition was scheduled for later in the month.

New Buffalo

After a contract between New Buffalo Area Schools and the Bradford Group expired in September, the district is looking to decide among three companies vying for a contract on the Bison Reserve Planned Unit Development.

A primary goal of the project, according to the original developer request for qualifications, is to provide attainable workforce housing to the region, including single-family units, apartments and townhomes.

Three interested developers include Habitat Company of Illinois, Leeward Ventures and the Southwest Michigan Community Land Trust.

South Haven Tribune CLASSIFIEDS

Classified Desk: 1-855-317-4292

Hours: Monday - Friday 9am-2pm EST

0200 EMPLOYMENT

The City of South Haven is seeking qualified candidates for the **Beach Safety Manager/ Chief Lifeguard**. Responsible for the oversight and coordination of all open water lifeguard and beach enforcement operations within the City of South Haven. The incumbent is expected to possess advanced knowledge of lifesaving practices in open water environments, emergency response operations, personnel management, public education, and administrative leadership.

Bachelor's degree in Public Administration, Recreation, Emergency Services, or related field preferred. Five years of experience in Public Safety Operations (open water lifeguard operations preferred), including at least one year of supervisory or management experience. Current EMT- Basic certification preferred. Valid State of Michigan Driver's License. Must pass the USLA open water swim test.

Candidates may apply online at www.southhavenmi.gov/human_r

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0200 EMPLOYMENT

esources or by mailing a resume and cover letter to City of South Haven, Attn HR, 539 Phoenix Street, South Haven, MI 49090.

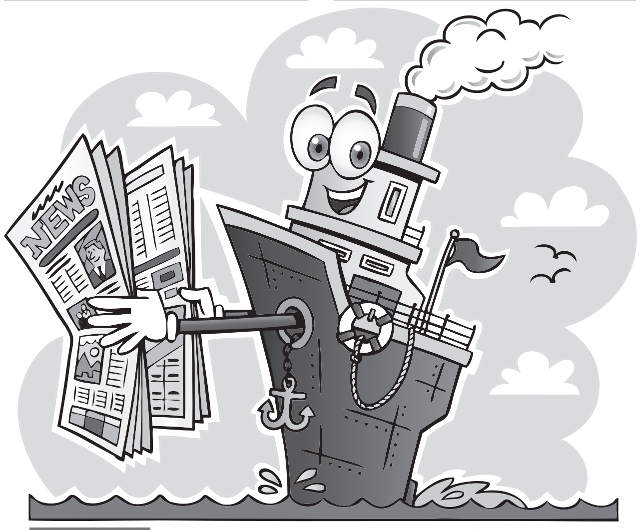
The City of South Haven is an Equal Opportunity Employer who places a high value on diversity, equity and inclusion.

0900 LEGALS

Notice to Creditors NOTICE TO CREDITORS AND CLAIMANTS

In accordance with the provisions of the Michigan Trust Code Notice is hereby given that MaryAnn Schlack, the deceased settlor Of the Mary Ann Schlack Living Trust, a revocable trust established on April 5th, 2023, died on December 3rd, 2025. The name and address of the Trustee are set forth below. All persons having claims against the Decedent or the Trust are required to present them to the Trustee at the address below Within four (4) months after the date of the first publication of this notice or be forever barred. Claims must be mailed to the Trustee via certified mail, return receipt requested at the address listed below.

Steven T. Schlack – Trustee
884 East Wells St.
South Haven MI 49090



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STATE OF MICHIGAN
IN THE 7th DISTRICT COURT FOR THE COUNTY OF VAN BUREN
1007 E. Wells St. South Haven, MI 49090

OMNI COMMUNITY CREDIT UNION,
a Michigan Credit Union,
Plaintiff,

Hon.: Arthur H. Clark III
v. Case No.: 25-0855-GC

ANGELO THOMAS GRIFFIOEN
an individual.
Defendant.
______________________________//
Lana M. Escamilla (P71275)
Lewis Reed & Allen, P.C.
Attorneys for Plaintiff
136 E. Michigan Avenue, Ste. 800
Kalamazoo, MI 49007
(269) 388-7600
______________________________//

ORDER FOR SERVICE OF PROCESS BY PUBLICATION

At a session of court held in the courthouse in the City of South Haven, Conty of Van Buren, State of Michigan on the 9th day of December 2025.
Present: Honorable Arthur H. Clarke, III, District Court Judge

Plaintiff filed a verified ex parte motion for service of process in the discretion of the court. After reading the motion and the accompanying affidavit and exhibits, the court finds that Plaintiff has shown that service of process cannot reasonably be made on Defendant, Angelo Thomas Griffioen, by the methods provided in MCR 2.105(A), in that Plaintiff has demonstrated that diligent attempts to locate Defendant and Defendant's current address and to serve Defendant by personal service have not been successful. The court further finds, pursuant to MCR 2.105(J), that service of process by publication is the best available method of service of process reasonably calculated to give Defendant actual notice of the proceedings and an opportunity to be heard.

IT IS ORDERED:

1. Plaintiff may serve process on Defendant by publishing the following notice once each week for a period of three consecutive weeks in a newspaper, as defined in MCR 2.106(F), that is published in the county of Defendant's last known address:

"You are being sued as of August 1, 2025, by Plaintiff, Omni Community Credit Union, against Defendant, Angelo Thomas Griffioen, in the Van Buren County District Court for the State of Michigan for return of the 2023 Polaris and also for damages in favor of Plaintiff and against Defendant in the amount of $17,127.24, together with costs of this suit, interest, and actual, reasonable attorney fees and grant such other relief as may be just and equitable including possession of the following described property: Plaintiff seeks claim and delivery of a 2023 Polaris ZZ3RAD92AK ID number 3NSRAD924PF290334, and Defendant must answer or take other action permitted by law within 28 days after the last date of publication. If Defendant does not answer or take other action within the time allowed, judgment may be entered against him for the relief demanded in the complaint."

Plaintiff must mail a copy of this order, along with a summons and a copy of the complaint, and the motion for possession pending judgment with restraining order and notice of hearing by first-class mail to the Defendant's last address and verified PO Box address.

/s/ Hon. Arthur H. Clarke, III, District Court Judge

Prepared by:
Lewis Reed & Allen, P.C.
Lana M. Escamilla (P71275)
Attorney for Plaintiff
136 E. Michigan Ave., Ste. 800, Kalamazoo, MI 49007

SELL YOUR ITEMS IN THE CLASSIFIEDS TODAY!

...BECAUSE MONEY DOESN'T GROW ON TREES!

Classifieds Make A Cash Connection!

End of Detroit newspapers' JOA heralds new era of competition

By SUMMER BALLENTINE
The Detroit News (TNS)

A nearly four-decade-long business partnership between The Detroit News and Detroit Free Press ended Sunday, pitting the newspapers against each other financially at a time when few other U.S. cities support two major papers.

Free Press owner USA TODAY Co., formerly known as Gannett Co. Inc., and MediaNews Group – owner of The News – in June opted against renewing the longstanding agreement, thus ending among the last such tie-ups in the country. The companies have not provided further reasoning behind the split.

The News announced recently it will launch a Sunday edition Jan. 18, at which point it will once again print newspapers all seven days. Other changes include makeovers for the detroitnews.com website and mobile app, an updated print design and a refreshed eNewspaper, Editor and Publisher Gary Miles said. The changes are expected to take place during a roughly month-long transition period.

The end of the Detroit joint operating agreement (JOA) marks the end of an era in U.S. newspapers. Aside from a contentious Las Vegas partnership that was ruled invalid earlier this year, the Detroit JOA was the last major JOA still in existence, and the only one in which both newspapers emerged to print seven days and compete on all digital platforms.

"To the JOA's credit, there are two newspapers to this day in metropolitan Detroit," said Mark Silverman, who was editor and publisher of The News from 1997 to 2005. "So that's clearly a positive. And both newspapers had very different editorial page positions. That's a positive for a community."

Joint operating agreements were cost-saving measures allowed by the Newspaper Preservation Act of 1970, which permitted two newspapers in the same city to merge their business operations to protect diversity in opinion and newsgathering. If approved by the federal government, the newsrooms continued to compete, but companies saved overhead costs associated with newsprint, printing presses and distribution.

"Even in the federal government, there was some understanding of the value of journalism and the value of preserving those voices," said Carole Leigh Hutton, a former Detroit News editor and the Free Press' former editor and publisher.

In virtually all cases outside of Detroit, newspapers concluded their partnerships with mergers, one partner shuttering its operations or the smaller paper dramatically curtailing operations.

Bitterly contested in court when it was first proposed in 1986, the Detroit joint operating agreement remains a subject of debate over whether it was a success, although its primary stated goal – preserving two editorial voices – was fulfilled.

"Ultimately, what it intended to do was to keep two papers in Detroit," said the Poynter Institute's Kelly McBride, who advises news organizations on best practices. "So yeah, I guess that means it was successful. Clearly, I don't think Detroit would have two papers now if the (joint operating agreement) had not existed."

But McBride and former editors of both papers said it's difficult to separate the role of business partnerships in the survival or death of newspapers compared to the existential loss of funding widely blamed on digital advertising.

"It's been a really tough environment for newspapers," Hutton said. "And they have gone to online-only in a lot of places. Many have just gone away. So it's not far-fetched to think it would have been tough to continue to have two nameplates in this particular area, and I think the JOA probably did keep two nameplates alive. But again, it's hard to know."

Although the rise of digital advertising at the expense of newspapers wasn't what prompted the tie-up, former Free Press publisher Dave Hunke said the timing of the agreement was unwittingly prescient.

"The JOA was necessary from an economic standpoint to keep two newspapers in place," Hunke said. "We were within a couple of years heading into the deepest financial crisis this country had seen since the Great Depression, and the business was not good."

The papers' upcoming split once again raises questions about the market for two dailies and whether current economics can support both outlets.

"People wanted two fiercely independent competitive newspapers in that town," said Hunke, who became president of the joint business operations when the partnership was reconstituted in 2005. "People wanted their newspapers. And they wanted them competitive, and they wanted them separate."

Both newspapers won Pulitzer Prizes during the partnership and "changed lives in the community," Hutton said. She cited coverage of former Detroit mayor Kwame Kilpatrick, who was convicted 12 years ago of federal racketeering and tax evasion charges after being accused of running a criminal enterprise out of City Hall, rigging bids and pocketing more than $840,000 in bribes and kickbacks.

"Even though there's a whole political entity out there that likes to trash it and say that journalism is harmful and anti-American, it's quite the opposite," she said. "If you think about it, journalism is about preserving the ideals and making sure that people know what's happening because it's our money, and it's our government, and it's our right, and it's supposed to be our decision. And it's just not possible for the average person to oversee what's happening in the world the way journalists should be overseeing it for them."

Hutton said the success of the papers "all comes down to: What do the advertisers think?"

"You got to unlock the business solution, somehow," Hunke said. "But you cannot take the shortcuts on the news side. Good journalism, in the end, I swear it will win. I just wish somebody could find a way to unlock the economics."

SNAP bans on soda, candy and other foods take effect in 5 states

By JONEL ALECCIA
Associated Press

Americans in five states who get government help paying for groceries now face new restrictions on soda, candy and other foods they can buy with those benefits.

Indiana, Iowa, Nebraska, Utah and West Virginia are the first of at least 18 states to enact waivers prohibiting the purchase of certain foods through the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, or SNAP.

It's part of a push by Health Secretary Robert F. Kennedy Jr. and Agriculture Secretary Brooke Rollins to urge states to strip foods regarded as unhealthy from the $100 billion federal program – long known as food stamps – that serves 42 million Americans.

"We cannot continue a system that forces taxpayers to fund programs that make people sick and then pay a second time to treat the illnesses those very programs help create," Kennedy said in a statement in December.

The efforts are aimed at reducing chronic diseases such as obesity and diabetes associated with sweetened drinks and other treats, a key goal of Kennedy's Make America Healthy Again effort.

But retail industry and health policy experts said state SNAP programs, already under pressure from steep budget cuts, are unprepared for the complex changes, with no complete lists of the foods affected and technical point-of-sale challenges that vary by state and store. And research remains mixed about whether restricting SNAP purchases improves diet quality and health.

The National Retail Federation, a trade association, predicted longer checkout lines and more customer complaints as SNAP recipients learn which foods are affected by the new waivers.

"It's a disaster waiting to happen of people trying to buy food and being rejected," said Kate Bauer, a nutrition science expert at the University of Michigan.

A report by the National Grocers Association and other industry trade groups estimated that implementing SNAP restrictions would cost U.S. retailers $1.6 billion initially and $759 million each year going forward.

"Punishing SNAP recipients means we all get to pay more at the grocery store," said Gina Plata-Nino, SNAP director for the anti-hunger advocacy group Food Research & Action Center.

The waivers are a departure from decades of federal policy first enacted in 1964 and later authorized by the Food and Nutrition Act of 2008, which said SNAP benefits can be used for "any food or food product intended for human consumption," except alcohol and ready-to-eat hot foods. The law also says SNAP can't pay for tobacco.

In the past, lawmakers have proposed stopping SNAP from paying for expensive meats like steak or so-called junk foods, such as chips and ice cream.

But previous waiver requests were denied based on USDA research concluding that restrictions would be costly and complicated to implement, and that they might not change recipients' buying habits or reduce health problems such as obesity.

Under the second Trump administration, however, states have been encouraged and even incentivized to seek waivers – and they responded.

"This isn't the usual top-down, one-size-fits-all public health agenda," Indiana Gov. Mike Braun said when he announced his state's request last spring. "We're focused on root causes, transparent information and real results."

The five state waivers that took effect Jan. 1 affect about 1.4 million people. Utah and West Virginia will ban the use of SNAP to buy soda and soft drinks, while Nebraska will prohibit soda and energy drinks. Indiana will target soft drinks and candy. In Iowa, which has the most restrictive rules to date, the SNAP limits affect taxable foods, including soda and candy, but also certain prepared foods.

"The items list does not provide enough specific information to prepare a SNAP participant to go to the grocery store," Plata-Nino wrote in a blog post. "Many additional items – including certain prepared foods – will also be disallowed, even though they are not clearly identified in the notice to households."

Marc Craig, 47, of Des Moines, said he has been living in his car since October. He said the new waivers will make it more difficult to determine how to use the $298 in SNAP benefits he receives each month, while also increasing the stigma he feels at the cash register.

"They treat people that get food stamps like we're not people," Craig said.

SNAP waivers enacted now and in the coming months will run for two years, with the option to extend them for an additional three, according to the Agriculture Department. Each state is required to assess the impact of the changes.

Health experts worry that the waivers ignore larger factors affecting the health of SNAP recipients, said Anand Parekh, chief policy officer at the University of Michigan School of Public Health.

"This doesn't solve the two fundamental problems, which is healthy food in this country is not affordable and unhealthy food is cheap and ubiquitous," he said.

DEATH DOULAS

From page A1

Wamba, who lives in Canton, generally focuses on clients in hospice who are closer to the end of their lives, acting as a "companion" for those who want to talk about their last moments.

That work came full circle when she became her grandmother's death doula.

In the last months of her life, the two shared meals and spent nights together. Other times, when other relatives were "dog tired" from providing the day-to-day care, Wamba said she was present for deep introspection and conversation.

"I was also able to listen to her wishes, things that she wanted us to be aware of before she transitioned," Wamba said. "She could talk through those things with me, and there would be a level of acceptance to be able to hold that space in a specific way that it might have been harder for sometimes her children to hold space for."

A 'gigantic spectrum' of deathcare

Death doulas operate as a "spiritual, emotional support" role, according to Hanna Hasselschwert of Acacia End of Life Services in Ypsilanti.

"We don't have control of our death, typically, but we do have a lot of things that we can control – what happens to our bodies and decisions that are made when we're gone," said Hasselschwert.

Death doulas, also referred to as death midwives or end-of-life doulas, exist on a "gigantic spectrum," Hasselschwert said. Sometimes the work is administrative, assisting families in finding the proper resources for estate planning or funeral arrangements. Other times, the work is focused on providing comfort for clients undergoing end-of-life palliative care.

Hasselschwert focuses on advanced planning, helping her clients navigate medical directives and estate logistics and how those details get communicated to families. She also helped launch the Michigan Deathcare Collaborative, a directory for "alternative, holistic deathcare" in Michigan, where she estimates about 50 death doulas operate.

As part of her work, Hasselschwert hosts a twice-monthly "Death Cafe" meet-up at coffee shops to normalize conversations about confronting death and grief.

Eli Newman / Bridge Michigan via AP

Hanna Hasselschwert facilitates a group discussion during a Death Cafe meeting Dec. 21 in Ypsilanti.

"Death is gonna happen. Talking about it doesn't make it more likely," said Melissa Chapman, a frequent Death Cafe participant and aspiring doula. "If somebody's pregnant … they learn about kids and about what pregnancy is like and how it works. It's a very similar thing."

Many at the cafe spend their time recounting their personal experience with family members and friends who have died, or "pre-grieving" those battling terminal disease and the difficulty they find engaging others about mortality.

Tommy Cook discovered the Ypsilanti Death Cafe after a friend died by suicide.

"Growing up, a lot of father figures were taken out of my life. Both my grandparents and then my dad as a senior in high school," Cook said. "Grief, for me, always continues where it left off."

Being present for difficult conversations about loss keeps Cook returning to the Death Cafe. "What we've all been through is really brutal," he said. "I feel like it'd be good if we all got training on how to be a death doula and how to be able to hold space for people grieving."

Hasselschwert, who works part-time at a fitness studio, said it's difficult for death doulas to make a full-time job of their positions, given the individual capacity for providing services and emotional tax the work has.

"We do this out of just our passion, our care. So most doulas work off a sliding scale," she said.

There's no formal license to become a death doula, but programs around the country provide assistance. In 2024, the National End-of-Life Doula Alliance reported its membership had grown to over 1,600, up from about 250 in 2019.

Both Hasselschwert and Wamba trained through the organization Going with Grace, which educates death doulas across the country through webinars and group studies. Alua Arthur, Going with Grace's founder, explained her role as a death doula in a 2023 Ted Talk.

"My goal is to help them answer the question: 'What must I do to be at peace with myself so that I may live presently and die gracefully, holding both at the same time?'"

An aging 'crisis'

In Michigan, death is outpacing life.

The state's death rate has increased over the decades from 8.6 deaths per 1,000 residents in 1970 to 10.3 in 2023 when 103,359 state residents died.

By comparison, Michigan registered 99,179 live births that year, marking a 60 percent decline in birth rates over the course of a century.

The state's flattening population growth has been described as an " unfolding crisis " by a task force appointed by Gov. Gretchen Whitmer. Funding to address the problems identified by the panel failed to materialize in the state's latest budget.

An ongoing Bridge investigation of aging in Michigan found that the state ranks 36th among 48 states in Medicaid spending on long-term care.

A recent survey conducted by the University of Michigan reports that while one-third of the state's population is over 50, few have taken proper preparations for their future long-term care needs.

Only 25 percent of residents over 50 have designated a durable power of attorney for medical care and 58 percent incorrectly believe Medicare will pay for nursing home care, according to the University of Michigan poll. Forty-six percent of state residents 50 to 64 and 39 percent of those over 65 say they have not discussed future health care plans with anyone.

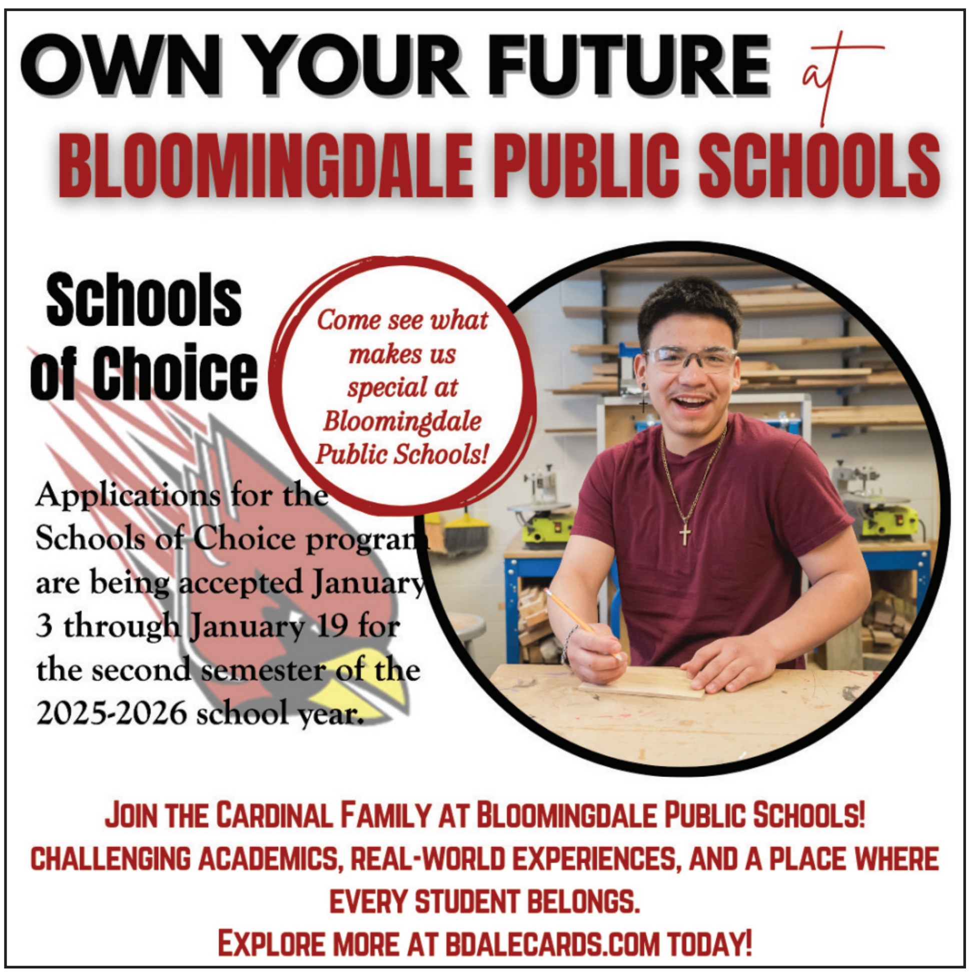
Wamba said her organization is trying to address Michigan's lack of end-of-life services, aiming to provide her services free-of-charge using alternative funding and donations.

"We've got so many more people that are moving into that space and needing the care," she said. "We also have this huge gap, though, of people who can't afford to have someone come in for $30 an hour to give 24-hour care to their loved ones."

Confronting death is something Chapman had already done before attending the Ypsilanti Death Cafe sessions – she had a "gut-wrenching" experience taking care of her father as he died.

But his death has given her perspective about what to expect at the end.

"Life is not all about longevity. It's all about quality," Chapman said. "We're all not going to get out of here alive."



SOUTH HAVEN COMMUNITY CALENDAR

Ongoing events

Visually impaired and blind persons support group meeting: Every third Wednesday of the month at 1 p.m. at Senior Services of Van Buren County.

Dementia and Alzheimer's caregivers support group meeting: Every third Wednesday of each month at 6 p.m. at Peace Evangelical Lutheran Church library.

Three Blondes Brewing: Trivia night on Thursdays at 7 p.m. and 8 p.m. and Sundays at 1 p.m. and 2 p.m.

Sparkle and Spice Boutique: Mom and Me play date. Fridays from 9-10 a.m.

South Haven Center for the Arts: Center Studio for adults from 6-8 p.m. on the first and third Wednesday of the month. Artists of any level can bring their own projects to work on. Basic art supplies will be available. Attendees must be 18 years old and over. Members are free, non-members cost $5.

South Haven Center for the Arts: Center Studio for ages 9 to 13 from 4-5:30 p.m. every Wednesday. Young artists are invited to create art at their own pace with an instructor to help guide as needed. Free workshop but a $10 donation is suggested to help cover cost of supplies.

Candlelight Yoga: Thursdays at 7:30 p.m. at the Church of Epiphany. Cost is $15.

Food pantry: First Congregational Church open from 10 a.m. to noon on Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays. It is a drive-up food pantry.

Food pantry: Sacred Heart Catholic Church. For Bangor residents only. Open from 1 to 4 p.m. on Thursdays.

Food, clothing, baby pantry: Lily of the Valley Church in Covert. Open from noon to 2 p.m. on Wednesdays. Must call the central office to register.

Personal care and clothing pantry: First Assembly of God open from 10 a.m. to 1 p.m. on Wednesdays. Must call the central office to register.

Baby pantry: Peace Lutheran Church open from 9 a.m. to 3 p.m. Monday through Friday. Must call the central office to register.

Baby pantry: Simpson United Methodist Church in Bangor. Open from 10 a.m. to noon on Tuesdays. Must call the central office to register.

South Haven Memorial Library: Story Time on 11 a.m. to noon on Tuesdays through May 26, 2026.

HawksHead: Pasta on the Patio every Wednesday at 5 p.m.

Michigan Maritime Museum: Hands-on the Harbor every Thursday at 10:30 a.m.

Liberty Hyde Bailey Museum: "The Story of Snow" by Mark Cassino and John Nelson Ph.D. Storywalk. The museum is now closed but appointments can be scheduled by calling the museum.

Lakeside Social Bowling Alley: Glow Bowl every Friday from noon to 9 p.m.

Bridge: Chicago Scoring at 1 p.m. on Tuesdays at Lakeside Social, 9921 Blue Star Memorial Highway, South Haven.

Bridge: Duplicate Scoring at 1 p.m. on Wednesdays at Lakeside Social, 9921 Blue Star Memorial Highway, South Haven.

Michigan Maritime Museum: free admission on the first Sunday of every month from November through April.

First United Methodist Church: Free meals every Tuesday night. Doors open at 5:30 p.m. Meal is served at 6 p.m.

January

5 – Covert Branch Library: After school art workshop for grades 6 to 12 from 3 to 5 p.m.

6 – Rotary Club: Rotary Club Annual Meeting, morning meeting. South Haven Rotary President Amy Nichols to present.

6 – Basketball: Girls freshman basketball against Hartford Public Schools at 4 p.m.

6 – Basketball: Girls junior varsity basketball against Climax-Scotts High School at 5:30 p.m.

6 – Basketball: Girls varsity basketball against Climax-Scotts High School at 7 p.m.

7 – Basketball: Boys freshman basketball against Brandywine Senior High School at 4 p.m.

7 – Basketball: Boys junior varsity basketball against Brandywine Senior High School at 5:30 p.m.

7 – Basketball: Boys varsity basketball against Brandywine Senior High School at 7 p.m.

9 – Basketball: Boys freshman basketball against Benton Harbor High School at 4 p.m.

9 – Basketball: Boys junior varsity basketball against Bridgman Public School at 5:30 p.m.

9 – Basketball: Boys varsity basketball against Bridgman Public School at 7 p.m.

12 – Basketball: Boys freshman basketball against Michigan Lutheran High School at 4 p.m.

12 – Basketball: Boys junior varsity basketball against Buchanan High School at 5:30 p.m.

12 – Basketball: Boys varsity basketball against Buchanan High School at 5:30 p.m.

13 – Swimming: Boys varsity swimming against Hastings High School at 6 p.m.

13 – Rotary Club: Morning meeting. Technical Manager with Wacker Chemie to present on how silicone is made and used.

14 – South Haven Memorial Library: Hooked on Yarn from 1 to 3:30 p.m.

14 – Bowling: Boys and girls varsity bowling against Allegan Public Schools at 4 p.m.

15 – Basketball: Boys freshman basketball against Allegan Public Schools at 4 p.m.

15 – Basketball: Girls junior varsity basketball against Allegan Public Schools at 5:30 p.m.

15 – Basketball: Boys junior varsity basketball against Allegan Public Schools at 7 p.m.

16 – South Haven Memorial Library: Messy Play for preschoolers from 11 a.m. to noon.

19 – Covert Branch Library: After school art workshop for grades 6 to 12 from 3 to 5 p.m.

20 – Rotary Club: Evening meeting at the American Legion beginning at 530p. Todd Marcy to present on the Detroit Lions app.

20 – Basketball: Boys freshman basketball against Hastings High School at 4 p.m.

20 – Basketball: Girls middle school basketball against Saugatuck High School at 5 p.m.

20 – Basketball: Boys junior varsity basketball against Black River Public School at 5:30 p.m.

20 – Basketball: Boys varsity basketball against Black River Public School at 7 p.m.

20 – Swimming: Boys varsity swimming against Allegan Public School at 6 p.m.

21 – Wrestling: Boys and Girls varsity wrestling at 6 p.m.

22 – Basketball: Boys freshman basketball against Watervliet High School at 4 p.m.

22 – Basketball: Girls junior varsity basketball against Watervliet High School at 5:30 p.m.

22 – Basketball: Boys junior varsity basketball against Watervliet High School at 7 p.m.

22 – Bowling: Boys and girls varsity bowling against Parchment High School at 4 p.m.

23 – South Haven Memorial Library: South Haven Writers read-around from 1 to 4 p.m. New writers welcome.

24 – South Haven Memorial Library: Astronomy Club for kids starting at 11 a.m.

26 – Covert Branch Library: After school art workshop for grades 6 to 12 from 3 to 5 p.m.

27 – Rotary Club: Morning meeting. Mike Sawyer to present on the Van Buren County Senior Services Ramp program.

27 – Wrestling: Boys and girls varsity wrestling at 6 p.m.

28 – South Haven Memorial Library: Hooked on Yarn from 1 to 3:30 p.m.

28 – Basketball: Girls middle school basketball against Black River Public School at 4 p.m.

28 – Basketball: Girls freshman basketball against Zeeland West High School at 4 p.m.

28 – Basketball: Girls junior varsity basketball against Zeeland West High School at 5:30 p.m.

28 – Basketball: Girls varsity basketball against Zeeland West High School at 7 p.m.

28 – Bowling: Boys and girls bowling against Martin Public School at 4 p.m.

29 – Basketball: Girls middle school basketball against Lakeshore High School at 5:30 p.m. All-area tournament.

30 – Girls varsity basketball against Coloma High School: 6 p.m.

30 – Boys varsity basketball against Coloma High School: 7:30 p.m.

30-31 – Ice Breaker Festival

Photo provided / Tom Renner

South Haven Lady Ram Madi Duda releases a shot during the 57-40 win over Black River of Holland.

Photo provided / Tom Renner

Junior LyNique Cunningham drives to the basket for a score in the game against Black River of Holland.

SMC names Pleasant as next president

By MAXWELL HARDEN
Paxton Media Group

DOWAGIAC — Southwestern Michigan College has found its new president.

At a special public meeting on Dec. 29, the Southwestern Michigan College Board of Trustees voted to appoint Dr. Klint Pleasant of Rochester Hills, Mich., to the position of college president. He is currently the senior vice president and special assistant to the president at Rochester Christian University.

PLEASANT

Pending contract negotiations, Pleasant will become SMC's ninth president. The college's eighth president, Dr. Joe Odenwald, stepped down in May of 2025 to become president of Alma College. Brent Brewer has served as interim president since then.

Pleasant has worked in higher education for 28 years and has spent the last 20 years in administration. He has managed enrollment, athletics, development, as well as having leadership responsibilities in retention, student mentoring and community relations. He has also served as an instructor in the classroom.

Further details including Pleasant's background and potential starting date will be forthcoming in January.

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The Spotlight

A Weekly Guide To Services & Business Around Town.

Confused about your health insurance options?
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Photos by Kayla Bartkowski / Los Angeles Times

Romina Bergman, 2, left, reaches her hand out to chimpanzee Yoshi’s newborn at the Los Angeles Zoo on Dec. 11 in Los Angeles, CA. Earlier this month, the Los Angeles Zoo welcomed the birth of a baby gorilla, the fifth and latest addition in a recent baby boom of adorable great apes that includes three chimpanzees and an orangutan.

Years of planning culminate in ‘baby boom’ of great apes at LA Zoo

Here’s how they did it

By ANDREA FLORES
Los Angeles Times (TNS)

LOS ANGELES — Every morning while the great apes of the L.A. Zoo are sleeping, Tania Prebble goes around distributing their food, medicine and other essentials.

She tosses carrots, celery and other fibrous treats like cucumbers on top of the branches and leaves that are reminiscent of the apes’ West Central Africa rainforest habitat.

But as of late, Prebble’s morning rounds have been a little different. She’s also taken along bedding – a lot more than usual – to help shepherd in an L.A. Zoo “baby boom” of great apes over the last four months.

The most recent primate was born Nov. 22 to 31-year-old N’djia and silverback Kelly, 38, whose daughter Angela in 2020 was the first gorilla born at the L.A. Zoo in more than 20 years.

The baby male gorilla has not yet been named by zoo staff, but he has already been introduced to his older sister.

“Mom has definitely got a nice maternal hold and is very protective of the baby,” said Prebble, animal keeper of the zoo’s western lowland gorillas. “Angela is starting to get a little bit more curious. She’s coming up very gently, mom has been letting her get closer and do sweet little kisses.”

Along with Angela’s newest sibling, the zoo has welcomed four other great apes recently.

Throughout two weeks starting in August, two chimpanzees gave birth – 35-year-old Yoshi gave birth to a female offspring, the first chimp born at the zoo in more than 10 years, followed by Vindi, an 18-year-old first-time mom, who delivered a female infant.

Chimpanzee Zoe, also an experienced mother, gave birth to a male infant earlier in November. In October, orangutan mother Kalim had a baby offspring from father Isim, raising the number of Bornean orangutans at the zoo to seven.

Visitors watch the western lowland gorillas eat breakfast at the Los Angeles Zoo on Dec. 11 in Los Angeles, California.

Chimpanzee Yoshi’s newborn holds onto her side while walking at the Los Angeles Zoo on Dec. 11 in Los Angeles, California.

On a recent weekday morning as Prebble finished up her check on the gorilla’s 26,000-square-foot enclosure and the zoo opened for business, children swarmed the barrier to catch a glimpse of the newborn gorilla clinging to his mother’s chest.

Zoo docents hovered nearby to answer questions while parents crouched beside their toddlers and pointed to similarities with the apes’ hands and feet.

As exciting as this great ape baby boom is for L.A. Zoo visitors, it is by no means a surprise to its staff, who have prepared for this moment for years with a slate of contingency plans for every possible scenario.

It is, however, a happy coincidence that all births happened within a four-month span.

“With the last round of babies, I had a lot of visitors tell me that they started caring more about chimps because they saw these babies and they’re so adorable,” said animal keeper Amy Rosson, who mainly cares for the chimpanzees at the Mahale Mountains habitat.

The baby boom is a direct result of breeding recommendations from the Assn. of Zoos and Aquariums, which creates a Species Survival Plan that determines which animals to prioritize for breeding around the world and with which mates to reduce the risk of inbreeding and to conserve populations in human care.

There are many questions these AZA matchmakers ask themselves before making breeding recommendations, and they extend beyond genetic and personality compatibility: Will these animals be able to create subgroups? Can the staff hand-rear the offspring if need be? Are there surrogate females at that institution that can step in if a mother rejects her infant?

In the end, these efforts still fall back on timing and luck, zoo officials say.

“It also is up to the animals,” says Dominick Dorsa II, director of Animal Programs. “You can have a breeding recommendation in place, but that doesn’t mean that you’ll be successful with the pregnancy and birth.”

For the zoo’s newest parents, the western lowland gorillas, their SSP recommendation was made in 2023 and was straightforward.

N’djia was taken off birth control in order to breed with Kelly, which would give their daughter Angela the opportunity to have a playmate as she would in the wild. This will ultimately help with Angela’s socialization and the well-being of the entire family.

The Bornean orangutan’s SSP, meanwhile, was created in February as part of a long-standing breeding recommendation because Kalim, the female, had not successfully conceived in the past. Orangutans have the longest inter-birth interval of all nonhuman primates; a single infant is born and cared for by its mother for seven to eight years before another infant is born.

Breeding can be trickier for chimpanzees, who are multimate animals.

“Even though there’s an alpha male, the more subordinate males within the troop will mate with the females and do what’s called sneak breeding,” said Candace Sclimenti, curator of mammals at the zoo. “The subordinates will take a female off and secretly breed her so that the alpha doesn’t see.”

In 2022, the zoo welcomed one of the most genetically valuable chimpanzee males in North America, Pu’iwa, from Hawaii. As part of the chimpanzee troop’s SSP recommendations the following year, Pu’iwa was allowed to mate with two females.

This resulted in the third pregnancy of 35-year-old female Yoshi, and the birth of their first female infant, coincidentally on Pu’iwa’s birthday, Aug. 20.

First-time mother Vindi, on the other hand, had her pick of four males.

“So we left her with the group and let nature take its course,” Sclimenti said. “We actually do a DNA test on the infant to determine paternity because we don’t know.”

Zoo officials say the new infants will play a beneficial role in the well-being and dynamics of the entire chimpanzee troop, which is one of the largest of any zoo in the country with, now, 17 total individuals.

“It’s really fun for the group because [the older chimps] love babies,” Rosson said. “When [the babies] get older, they’ll hitch a ride on a different group member and it’s just really a nice family dynamic to see.”

In preparation for the triple chimp births, the zoo created a separate maternal group with experienced mothers in order to ensure the acclimation of a first-time mother, Vindi, who they say is a bit spicy. Staff members were unsure if she’d take to being a mother and have been pleased with what they’ve seen.

“She was just so natural,” Rosson said.

Once the maternal group is well-adjusted in their role, they will integrate back with the larger troop, zoo officials said.

For the dozen staff members who care for the zoo’s great apes, the baby boom has been a welcomed reminder of why some of them entered the profession in the first place.

“Everyone that’s involved is here for the love of animals and the passion and wanting to leave the planet a better place than we have made it,” said Sclimenti, the zoo’s mammal curator.

At the same time, Prebble said, she hopes that visitors can learn more about newborn primates, which are classified as endangered or critically endangered by the International Union for Conservation of Nature. This is often due to dangers animals face in the wild, including poaching for bushmeat, habitat loss and degradation – in some instances caused by mineral hunting for electronics – as well as disease.

“With the [population of gorillas] ranging from 300,000 in the wild to 300 or so in the zoos – it’s a big impact what we can do ourselves to help,” she said.

Photos by Anthony Souffle / The Minnesota Star Tribune / TNS

Mike Swisher of Prescott, Wisconsin, shows off the gold he's collected panning the past during a trip to the Mississippi River along with fellow members of the group the Gold Prospectors of Minnesota and Wisconsin on Nov. 22 at Babcock Memorial Park in Elk River, Minnesota.

There's gold in that there river, say Minnesota treasure hunters

By RICHARD CHIN
The Minnesota Star Tribune (TNS)

Billy Burnside of Hawley, Minnesota, pans for gold in the Mississippi River along with fellow members of the group the Gold Prospectors of Minnesota and Wisconsin on Nov. 22 at Babcock Memorial Park in Elk River, Minnesota.

MINNEAPOLIS — In the classic 1948 Humphrey Bogart movie, "The Treasure of the Sierra Madre," an old gold prospector opines that the precious metal is valuable because an ounce represents the sweat and heartbreak of thousands of men who have searched for it.

"An ounce of gold, mister, is worth what it is because of the human labor that went into the findin' and the gettin' of it," declares the old miner.

The men who are searching and finding gold right here, right now, in the Mississippi River, are a testament to that insight.

They spend hours standing in murky water, stooping and squatting over buckets and pans, shoveling and sifting with hand tools and human muscles, processing hundreds of pounds of rocks, gravel, sand and mud.

The result: Tiny, but heavy specks with that unmistakable yellow gleam.

"One of the best kept secrets about the Mississippi is that it's full of gold. Real King Tut coating, Spanish sunken treasure, gold," declares a gold hunter from Columbia Heights named Lucas Lundgren. "The question is how much."

The answer is definitely some. But, alas, not a lot.

Lundgren, who calls himself the Glacial Gold Hunter, is a 40-year-old geologist who has spent the last year and a half trekking around Minnesota, Michigan, Wisconsin and Iowa prospecting and panning for gold in lakes, rivers and streams.

"I've found gold in all of them," he said.

He's documented his quest in 120 enthusiastic but quirky YouTube videos in a channel with about 24,000 subscribers. They range from " Gold in Regular MN Dirt " to " Lake Superior Beach Gold."

In one video, Lundgren shows himself toiling away to pan through 40 5-gallon buckets of Mississippi River dirt to see how much gold can be found in a cubic yard of soil from the river bottom.

It was an experiment, he said, to see if gold mining would be profitable in Minnesota.

After lots of hand shoveling and sifting, he excitedly reports that little bits of gold are showing up in his pan.

"Holy crap, that's a big chunk of gold! That's a giant speck from the Mississippi," he said.

"It looks like the night sky. There's a lot of gold in there," he said of the tiny flecks winking in the sunlight hitting his pan.

He puts on his geologist hat to explain that the gold he's finding is the result of glacial movements from the last ice age that scraped up gold deposits in Canada and deposited them here. It then collects in places where water is flowing or has flowed.

"That is a beautiful little pile of gold," he said after hours of work processing "40 buckets of Mississippi River paydirt."

But the final tally is basically a tiny pinch of shiny dust so fine that you need a plastic suction bottle to pick it up. It weighed a grand total of 0.048 grams, about the weight of a drop of water.

Gold is currently worth more than $4,000 an ounce. But Lundgren calculated that the gold he found searching through a cubic yard of material from the Mississippi was worth only $6.19.

His answer on whether you can run a profitable gold mine on the Mississippi in Minnesota: "Absolutely not. But it sure is a lot of fun to go out and get these little specks."

In another video that Lundgren took of himself in the Mississippi, a passerby can be heard off camera asking, "Are you panning for gold?"

"Yeah," he replies.

"You find gold?"

"Yeah."

"Like gold rings?"

"No. Little pieces. I'll show you."

After showing off the tiny bits of precious metal in his pan, he comments, "She wasn't nearly as impressed as I thought she'd be. Then she quickly went away."

Pickers, feelers, nuggets and viral videos

Despite the slim odds of hitting it rich, Lundgren isn't the only person who has gold fever around here.

A Facebook group called Gold Prospectors of Minnesota and Wisconsin has about 7,500 members.

Group administrator Steven Shoemaker said he first tried gold prospecting in Alaska when he was stationed there after joining the Army in 1974.

He returned to the Twin Cities and gold prospecting after retiring from a 40-year-career in the Army that included stints as a Blackhawk helicopter pilot stationed in Iraq.

The 70-year-old once hunted for gold along the entire length of the Mississippi in Minnesota, panning every 50 miles or so on the river, starting from just outside Itasca State Park down to the Iowa border.

Recreational gold hunters are only allowed to use handheld, non-motorized, non-mechanical tools in Minnesota. In other words, the same sort of shovels and pans that humans have used for hundreds of years to find gold.

But Shoemaker has also tried underwater dredging and sluice boxes in gold hunting trips in other states, including Arizona and the gold rush town of Chicken, Alaska.

In gold hot spots like that, he's found the sort of nugget-sized pieces that are only dreamed of in Minnesota.

Despite those bigger strikes, Shoemaker said his travel and other costs still make it a losing proposition.

"You come home with less money than you pay to go up," he said of his gold hunting trips.

Besides, he doesn't intend to sell what he finds.

"I'll die with every piece that I'll ever find," he said. "I'm not worried about the price. It's show and tell gold."

"I put it on the shelf and look at it," Lundgren said of the little vial of gold that for him represents a year and a half of searching.

A similar sentiment was expressed by many of the dozen or so guys (most prospectors are guys) who showed up recently at a gathering of gold panners on the Mississippi at a little park in Elk River.

Panning for gold isn't allowed in state or national parks, but it's OK in other public lands.

"We're not going to find big nuggets here," said Kevin Keck, a 62-year-old Minneapolis resident who describes gold panning as his retirement hobby.

"It's all flour gold," he said referring to the powder-like gold particles prospectors typically pan out of the Mississippi River.

Larger particles, big enough to feel with a finger, are called "feelers." Something about the size of a grain of sand, big enough to pick up with your fingers but not worthy of being described as a nugget, are called "pickers."

It's a truism, according to Shoemaker, that in past gold rushes, the people who reliably made the most money were the ones selling supplies to the prospectors.

That's sort of true today, except instead of selling shovels, wheel barrows and denim jeans, the real money may be in supplying information and entertainment to actual and armchair gold hunters via social media content.

For example, one of Lundgren's YouTube videos titled, " Panning 100 Pans in Minneapolis: Mississippi River Gold! " has gotten 1.9 million views. That earned him more than $6,000, far more than the value of all the gold he's found.

"For me the mother lode is when a video goes viral," Lundgren said.

But even for gold prospectors who measure their finds by the thimbleful, there's something magical about finding bits of treasure hidden under our feet.

Monticello resident Tom Schultz said he's been prospecting with his 13-year-old daughter, Eleanor, after learning about gold prospecting from an online video.

He said finding gold was like catching a fish for the first time.

"It was super exciting," he said. "I had no idea you could do this in Minnesota."

"You look out there and you think there's nothing there. It's just gravel," said Mike Swisher, a gold prospector from Prescott, Wis. But when you find gold, "It's a rush. It's an accomplishment."

"No other color is like it," said James Ingham, a prospector from Austin, Minn., of the sight of gold shining in a pan. "It just lights up your eye."

And like the prospector in the movie, Shoemaker said it's the effort to find it that makes it precious.

"Gold is rare. Gold is so hard to find," he said. "When you find it, you've accomplished something. You've wrestled something from Mother Nature."

FOCUS

It's been 25 years since America decided to save the Everglades

Where do we stand?

A very large alligator is hidden in the sawgrass on April 18, 2022, at Shark Valley in the Everglades National Park.
Joe Cavaretta / South Florida Sun Sentinel / TNS

By BILL KEARNEY
South Florida Sun Sentinel (TNS)

The 20th century was horrible for the Everglades. The broad shallow river, one of the most unique ecosystems on the planet, was labeled wasteland and ruthlessly dammed, carved into parcels, dried out and diverted into near oblivion.

But at the end of the century, 25 years ago this month, Democrats and Republicans from Florida and Washington, D.C., joined forces and signed the Comprehensive Everglades Restoration Plan into law.

The ambitious 68-project plan was supposed to cost $7.8 billion, it was supposed to take 30 years to complete and it was supposed to save what was left of the Everglades.

That's not how things have played out, at least not yet. Two of those three expectations have been vastly overshot – costs have tripled to $23 billion and it could take another 20 years to complete.

Experts say restoration success hinges on two things: The engineering has to work and the people of Florida have to be willing to pay for the job to be finished.

But where do we stand 25 years in? After decades of funding delays, after heated controversies over reservoir size, after "lost summers" due to toxic blue-green algae, the pace of construction has finally quickened. The "crown jewel" of restoration – the Everglades Agricultural Area Reservoir – is finally under construction. More water is flowing under Tamiami Trail and into Everglades National Park.

Shannon Estenoz is the chief policy officer of The Everglades Foundation, a nonprofit focused on science and policy around the restoration plan. To use a sports metaphor about the restoration, she said, "I would say we are in the fourth quarter of the restoration program, and we're ahead, we're winning. But the game is still losable, we could still blow it. … We, the people, could get this wrong. So we've got to keep our heads in the game and stay focused."

In a nutshell, the restoration plan looks to reverse the mistakes of the 20th century.

The Everglades once flowed 220 miles from south of Orlando to Lake Okeechobee, down through what is now the Everglades Agricultural Area, the Miccosukee Reservation and into Everglades National Park. The river terminated through vast mangrove-lined estuaries in Florida Bay and the Gulf.

But the modern world envisioned a dry farmable Everglades.

During the 20th century, the river was dammed and cut into boxes. Some became suburbia, some became farmland. Remaining wild areas were often parched, or in some cases, such as along Tamiami Trail, where the Miccosukee Reservation sits, flooded.

Florida Bay grew too salty without enough fresh water, and during wet years, as of 2025, half of the original Everglades has been destroyed.

The restoration plan has moved at a maddeningly slow pace for some, especially during weather extremes.

During dry years, Florida Bay has become so salty and hot that seagrass die-offs fuel algae blooms that in turn fueled more seagrass die-offs. Recovery takes decades. During wet years, such as 2016, canals shunted highly polluted Lake Okeechobee water east and west to estuaries near Stuart and Fort Myers, decimating those ecosystems and prompting "lost summers" of economic damage.

"You know, we were slow in getting out of the box," said Steve Davis, The Everglades Foundation's chief science officer, referencing the cumbersome process of planning and navigating funding cycles in Congress. "But now we're kind of hitting all of those key metrics in terms of having projects planned, having them authorized, having the money to now construct and even accelerate something like the (Everglades Agricultural Area) Reservoir."

The pace of groundbreaking, construction and completion of pivotal projects has undeniably accelerated in the last few years.

In July of this year, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, the agency overseeing the restoration, agreed to allow the state to take the lead in construction on key projects, including the reservoir, which is now projected to be done by 2029 instead of 2034.

Since 2023, the Army Corps and South Florida Water Management District, which also oversees the plan, have made many gains, including:

■ Completing the C-43 impoundment, which stores water off of Lake Okeechobee and doles it out into the Caloosahatchee estuary at a slower, eco-friendly pace, helping fish and oysters thrive.

■ Breaking ground on the pivotal EAA Reservoir, which will store Lake Okeechobee discharges before the water flows into filtration marshes and eventually south to Florida Bay. It will also help the Army Corps reduce polluted Lake Okeechobee discharges to delicate estuaries near Stuart and Fort Myers.

■ Breaking ground on the Blue Shanty Flow Way, which will move more fresh water under the Tamiami Trail and into Florida Bay. This will also lower water levels in the Miccosukee Reservation, where water is often too high for too long, damaging the ecosystem.

■ Completing the Biscayne Bay Coastal Wetlands Project, which filters suburban canal water through a restored wetland before it disperses more naturally into Biscayne National Park, where it helps seagrass and marine wildlife thrive.

■ Additionally, the Army Corps and water management district have completed three miles of bridging along Tamiami Trail, which previously acted as a dam.

When will it all be done? Col. Brandon Bowman of the Army Corps said it will be "a couple decades" before every last one of the 68 infrastructure projects is finished.

"Yes, we're 25 years into CERP (the restoration plan)," said Eve Samples, spokesperson for Friends of the Everglades, an environmental nonprofit. "But we still haven't finished the job in terms of land acquisition."

The lynchpin of restoration

Though breaking ground on the reservoir and accelerating its schedule has been cause for celebration, it has been the most contentious project on the restoration plan. Critics say its current footprint and functionality is insufficient.

Optimists in the early 2000s envisioned a shallow, 60,000-acre wildlife-friendly reservoir south of Lake Okeechobee that would have required the sugar industry to sell a significant amount of land.

The dream almost came true.

Gov. Charlie Crist cut a deal in 2008 with a company called U.S. Sugar to buy all the company's EAA land – 187,000 acres – and convert some of it into the EAA Reservoir and filtration marshes.

Then the Great Recession hit and the state lacked the funds to buy the land. When Gov. Rick Scott was elected in 2010 he had the option to buy most of the land, but he chose not to. It was expensive, $1.34 billion, and when sugar prices rose, the industry, which had contributed handsomely to Scott's Let's Get to Work political committee, became reluctant to part ways with the land.

Scott would go on to cut state budgets devoted to land acquisition. It would be another nine years before the state signed a law funding a restoration reservoir in 2017, but the project would be limited to land the state already owned.

The project broke ground in 2023.

Once completed, the reservoir will be a 10,500-acre, 23-foot-deep, tub-shaped impoundment with 37-foot-tall banks. Its total capacity will be about two-thirds of the original plan.

There will be another 6,500 acres of critical filtration marsh, known as stormwater treatment areas to go with it.

Critics say it's not enough.

Scientists at Friends of the Everglades believe the system needs another 100,000 acres of water storage and cleaning south of Lake Okeechobee. That would require the state to purchase more land in the EAA.

"That (100,000 acres) sounds like a daunting number until you remember that we do have voter-approved land acquisition money from the state of Florida," said Samples.

In 2014, Florida voters overwhelmingly approved Amendment 1, which appropriated tax revenue to land acquisition for the purposes of conservation. Conservation groups have sued the state Legislature over how the money should be spent.

Samples has concerns about the sugar industry selling their farmland to mines or housing developers.

"There's still about 400,000 acres of sugar cane in the Everglades Agricultural Area, and we know that the industry is looking at other uses for that land because it has proposed a rock mine, for example, and there have been other development proposals in the EAA," she said.

Samples said that changes in use would require government approval from Palm Beach County. "There are some forks in the road," she said, "that are critical to the future health, not just to the Everglades, but to all of South Florida – our water supply, our ecology, our clean water-based tourism economy."

Clean water worries

The size of the reservoir is not the only concern. By law, the water flowing into the Everglades must be clean.

Water from Lake Okeechobee and the EAA is laced with the fertilizer phosphorus, which wreaks havoc in the Everglades by spiking the growth of plants that don't belong there, choking out the foundation of the whole system.

Stormwater treatment areas, known as STAs – managed marshes that filter the phosphorus – are seen by many to be the weak link in the restoration chain.

Their current setup has no redundancy, and sometimes they must be shut down. It's illegal to send polluted water south, so the flow stops.

"They're kind of unpredictable biological systems and unpredictable from the standpoint that we don't know how much rain is going to come, when it's going to come," said Davis of The Everglades Foundation. "We don't know when the hurricanes are going to come. They have an impact on STAs. … What we've seen is that we really have no redundancy in that infrastructure."

A new STA is being built next to the EAA Reservoir, but it will only be able to handle about half of the reservoir's annual outflow.

The rest will have to go to STAs that already get agriculture runoff. The lack of redundancy concerns both Davis and Samples.

"There is no Everglades restoration unless the water is clean," said Samples, "and we can't clean adequate volumes of water unless more land is acquired in the EAA," said Samples.

Bowman is more confident.

He says the water management district has become quite good at managing the STAs.

"So from what we're seeing, the science is kind of getting dialed in, as long as they stay hydrated. I think they (the STAs) are going to do what they're needed to do."

The Miccosukee flooding

Other issues persist. The Everglades are currently boxed off into massive swaths of land, some dotted beautifully with tree islands and a landscape much as it's been for 5,000 years, some bereft of water flow and thus flattened into homogeneous plains of sawgrass that don't support as much life, some of it too wet.

The Miccosukee Reservation sits at the south end of a series of levees that funnel water onto it. and the Tamiami Trail is not yet porous enough to allow that water to pass south quickly.

During wet years, the reservation ends up being too wet for too long, driving out wildlife and damaging plant life.

Construction on the Blue Shanty Flow Way, which helps move more water through the Tamiami Trail, also has been accelerated to line up with the reservoir's completion.

Bowman said in addition to Blue Shanty and the three miles of bridging that already exists on the Tamiami Trail, the Army Corps is cutting culverts into several of the levees and canals that cause high water on the the reservation.

The culverts will allow Everglades flow to spread out more naturally in an east-west direction instead of hemming it in.

Pending risks

There are ecological concerns to the restoration's success, but there are also political and social ones.

Davis said one of the threats to restoration at this juncture is complacency. "The risk is just thinking that, you know, we've got enough momentum to get us across the finish line. We don't."

Bowman of the Army Corps said that the pace of restoration is tied to funding from both the state and federal government, and that money hinges on public opinion. Completion is going to be based on funds availability – you know, how much willpower folks push on Congress and on Tallahassee to keep on funding it."

Another long-term concern for environmental nonprofits, such as Friends of the Everglades, is what will happen if the Everglades Agricultural area, much of which sits in Palm Beach County, is developed into housing.

What will success look like?

Estenoz said the best way to measure success is to look at the ecological response – "when we stop depriving Florida Bay of fresh water, can seagrass recover?"

Wading bird nesting activity is one indicator.

Mark Cook, an avian biologist with the South Florida Water Management District, found in 2018 that nesting activity in South Florida was way up, particularly in the Everglades system, even reaching levels similar to the 1930s, but they've fluctuated since.

Even the topography can change relatively quickly, though.

Davis said that within five or 10 years of flow restoration, areas that are less than ideal – flat homogeneous sawgrass with no topography – can form sloughs of deeper water where fish can survive dry season and humps of dry land that wildlife such as bobcats to wading birds can exploit all year.

As far as estuary wildlife that should flourish as restoration kicks in, Davis is keen on a few indicator species – pink shrimp, juvenile crocodiles and spotted sea trout – which are all uniquely sensitive to Florida Bay salinity. "If we're getting more flows south, we're seeing improved conditions for those indicator species."

He said the same will hold true for oysters and seagrass in the Caloosahatchee River and the St. Lucie River estuaries once massive freshwater pulses from Lake Okeechobee stop.

As large as those ecosystems are, Davis' key vision for the restoration's future is tiny, and tied to a memory from the past.

He started exploring the coastal Everglades in 1995 and witnessed dense lush seagrass beds beyond what he'd ever imagined.

"You'd have seagrasses that are so productive that they're just producing excess oxygen – it looks like Champagne bubbles coming off of these blades, floating up to the surface. It was just phenomenal to see."

HEALTH

Guns marketed for personal safety fuel public health crisis in Black communities

By FRED CLASEN-KELLY and DANIEL CHANG
KFF Health News (TNS)

Photos by Meredith Rizzo for KFF Health News / TNS
Leon Harris credits his wife, Tierra, with helping him find happiness and build a life after injuries from a shooting took away his ability to walk.

Leon Harris is one of tens of thousands of Americans injured each year by gun violence. Now he is considering buying a gun to protect his daughter and their home outside Philadelphia.

PHILADELPHIA — Leon Harris, 35, is intimately familiar with the devastation guns can inflict. Robbers shot him in the back nearly two decades ago, leaving him paralyzed from the chest down. The bullet remains lodged in his spine.

"When you get shot," he said, "you stop thinking about the future."

He is anchored by his wife and child and faith. He once wanted to work as a forklift driver but has built a stable career in information technology. He finds camaraderie with other gunshot survivors and in advocacy.

Still, trauma remains lodged in his daily life. As gun violence surged in the shadows of the COVID pandemic, it shook Harris' fragile sense of security. He moved his family out of Philadelphia to a leafy suburb in Delaware. But a nagging fear of crime persists.

Now he is thinking about buying a gun.

Harris is one of tens of thousands of Americans killed or injured each year by gun violence, a public health crisis that escalated in the pandemic and churns a new victim into a hospital emergency room every half hour.

Over the past two decades, the firearm industry has ramped up production and stepped up sales campaigns through social media influencers, conference presentations, and promotions. An industry trade group acknowledged that its traditional customer was " pale, male and stale " and in recent years began targeting Black people and other communities of color who are disproportionately victimized by gun violence.

The Trump administration has moved to reduce federal oversight of gun businesses, heralding a new era announced by the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives as "marked by transparency, accountability, and partnership with the firearms industry."

The pain of gun violence crosses political, cultural, and geographic divides – but no group has suffered as much as Black people, such as Harris. They were nearly 14 times as likely to die by gun homicide than white people in 2021, researchers said, citing federal data. Black men and boys are 6 percent of the population but more than half of homicide victims.

Washington has offered little relief: Guns remain one of few consumer products the federal government does not regulate for health and safety.

"The politics of guns in the U.S. are so out of whack with proper priorities that should focus on health and safety and most fundamental rights to live," said attorney Jon Lowy, founder of Global Action on Gun Violence, who helped represent Mexico in an unsuccessful lawsuit against Smith & Wesson and other gunmakers that reached the Supreme Court. "The U.S. allows and enables gun industry practices that would be totally unacceptable anywhere else in the world."

KFF Health News undertook an examination of gun violence during the pandemic, a period when firearm deaths reached an all-time high. Reporters reviewed academic research, congressional reports, and hospital data and interviewed dozens of gun violence and public health experts, gun owners, and victims or their relatives.

The examination found that while public officials imposed restrictions intended to prevent COVID's spread, politicians and regulators helped fuel gun sales – and another public health crisis.

As state and local governments shut down schools, advised residents to stay home, and closed gyms, theaters, malls, and other businesses to stop COVID's spread, President Donald Trump kept gun stores open, deeming them essential businesses critical to the functioning of society.

White House spokesperson Kush Desai did not respond to interview requests or answer questions about the Trump administration's efforts to reduce regulation of the firearm industry.

During the pandemic, the federal government gave firearm businesses and groups more than $150 million in financial assistance through the Paycheck Protection Program, even as some businesses reported brisk sales, according to an analysis from Everytown for Gun Safety, an advocacy group.

Federal officials said the program would keep people employed, but millions of dollars went to firearm companies that did not say whether it would save any jobs, the report said.

About 1 in 5 American households bought a gun during the first two years of the pandemic, including millions of first-time buyers, according to survey data from NORC at the University of Chicago.

Harris is keenly aware of what drives the demand.

"Guns aren't going away unless we get to the root of people's fears," he said.

Surveys show most Americans who own a gun feel it makes them safer. But public health data suggests that owning a gun doubles the risk of homicide and triples chances of suicide in a home.

"There's no evidence that guns provide an increase in protection," said Kelly Drane, research director for the Giffords Law Center to Prevent Gun Violence. "We have been told a fundamental lie."

Record deaths

Less than a year into the pandemic, 20-year-old Jacquez Anlage was shot dead in a Jacksonville, Florida, apartment. Five years later, the killing remains unsolved.

His mother, Crystal Anlage, said she fell to her knees and wailed in grief on her lawn when police delivered the news.

She said Jacquez overcame years in the foster care system – living in 36 homes – before she and her husband, Matt, adopted him at age 16.

Jacquez Anlage had just moved into his own apartment when he was shot. He loved animals and wanted to become a veterinary technician. He was kind and loving, Crystal Anlage said, with the 6-foot-4, 215-pound physique of the football and basketball player he'd been.

"He was just getting to a point in life where he felt safe," Crystal Anlage said.

Gun violence researchers say parents like Crystal Anlage carry trauma that destroys their sense of security.

Anlage said she endures post-traumatic stress disorder and anxiety. She is terrified of guns and fireworks.

But she has made something meaningful of her son's killing: She co-founded the Jacksonville Survivors Foundation, which works to raise awareness about the impact of homicide and to support grieving parents.

"Jacquez's death can't be in vain," she said. "I want his legacy to be love."

His legacy and that of other young men killed by guns is muted by firearm manufacturers' powerful message of fear.

During the pandemic, gun marketers told Americans they needed firearms to defend themselves against criminals, protesters, unreliable cops, and racial and political unrest, according to a petition filed by gun control advocacy groups with the Federal Trade Commission.

In a since-deleted June 18, 2020, Instagram post from Lone Wolf Arms, an Idaho-based manufacturer, a protester is depicted being confronted by police officers in riot gear between the words "Defund Police? Defend Yourself," the petition shows. The caption says, "10 percent to 25 percent off demo guns and complete pistols."

Impact Arms, an online gun seller, posted a picture on Instagram on Aug. 3, 2020, showing a person putting a rifle in a backpack, the document says. "The world is pretty crazy right now," the caption reads. "Not a bad idea to pack something more efficient than a handgun."

The National Rifle Association in 2020 posted on YouTube a four-minute video of a Black woman holding a rifle and telling viewers they need a gun in the pandemic. "You might be stockpiling up on food right now to get through this current crisis," she said, "but if you aren't preparing to defend your property when everything goes wrong, you're really just stockpiling for somebody else."

The messaging worked. Background checks for firearm sales soared 60 percent from 2019 to 2020, the year the federal government declared a public health emergency.

The same year, more than 45,000 Americansdied from firearm violence, the highest number up till then. In 2021, the record was broken again.

Weapons sold at the beginning of the pandemic were more likely to wind up at crime scenes within a year than in any previous period, according to a report by Democrats on Congress' Joint Economic Committee, citing ATF data.

Gun manufacturers "used disturbing sales tactics" following mass shootings in Buffalo, New York, and Uvalde, Texas, "while failing to take even basic steps to monitor the violence and destruction their products have unleashed," according to a separate memo released by congressional Democrats in July 2022 following a House Oversight and Reform Committee investigation of industry practices and profits.

The firearm industry has marketed "to white supremacist and extremist organizations for years, playing on fears of government repression against gun owners and fomenting racial tensions," the House investigation said. "The increase in racially motivated violence has also led to rising rates of gun ownership among Black Americans, allowing the industry to profit from both white supremacists and their targets."

In 2024, then-President Joe Biden's Department of the Interior provided a $215,000 grant to the National Shooting Sports Foundation, a leading firearm industry trade group, to help companies market guns to Black Americans.

The Federal Trade Commission is responsible for protecting consumers from deceptive and unfair business practices and has the power to take enforcement action. It issued warnings to companies that made unsubstantiated claims their products could prevent or treat COVID, for instance.

But when families of gun violence victims, lawmakers, and advocacy groups asked the FTC in 2022, during Biden's term, to investigate how firearms were marketed to children, people of color, and groups that espouse white supremacy, officials did not announce any public action.

This summer, the National Shooting Sports Foundation pressed its case to the FTC and derided "a coordinated 'lawfare' campaign" that it said gun control groups have waged against "constitutionally-protected firearm advertising."

FTC spokesperson Mitchell Katz declined to comment, saying in an email that the agency does not acknowledge or deny the existence of investigations.

Serena Viswanathan, who retired as an FTC associate director in June, told KFF Health News that the agency lost at least a quarter of the staff in its advertising practices division after Trump came into office in January.

Gun companies Smith & Wesson, Lone Wolf Arms, and Impact Arms did not respond to requests for comment. Neither did the National Shooting Sports Foundation or the NRA.

In an August 2022 social media post, Smith & Wesson President and CEO Mark Smith said gun manufacturers were being wrongly blamed by some politicians for the pandemic surge in violence, saying cities experiencing violent crime had "promoted irresponsible, soft-on-crime policies that often treat criminals as victims and victims as criminals."

He added, "Some now seek to prohibit firearm manufacturers and supporters of the 2nd Amendment from advertising products in a manner designed to remind law-abiding citizens that they have a Constitutional right to bear arms in defense of themselves and their families."

Guns and race

In 2015, the National Shooting Sports Foundation gathered supporters at a conference in Savannah, Georgia, and urged the firearm industry to diversify its customer base, according to a YouTube video and reports from Everytown for Gun Safety and the Violence Policy Center.

Competitive shooter Chris Cheng gave a presentation called "Diversity: The Next Big Opportunity." Screenshots from the conference include slides purporting to show "demographics," "psychographics," and "technographics" of Black and Hispanic shooters.

The slides described Black shooters as "expressive and confident socially, in a crowd" and "less likely to be married and to be a college grad." They said Hispanic shooters were "much more trusting of advertising and celebrities."

Nick Suplina, senior vice president for law and policy at Everytown for Gun Safety, said industry marketing shifted in the latter half of the 20th century as the popularity of hunting declined. The new sales pitch: guns for personal safety.

"They said, 'We need to break into new markets,'" Suplina said. "They identified women and people of color. They didn't have a lot of success until the pandemic, the Black Lives Matter movement, and the death of George Floyd. The marketing says, 'You deserve the Second Amendment too.' They are selling the product as an antidote to fear and anxiety."

Gun manufacturers were harshly criticized in the Oversight Committee's 2022 investigation for marketing products to people of color, as gun violence remains a leading cause of death for young Black and Latino men.

At the same time, some companies also promoted assault rifles to white supremacist groups who believe a race war is imminent, the investigation found. One company sold an AK-47-style rifle called the "Big Igloo Aloha," a reference to an anti-government movement, it said.

Still, Philip Smith wants more Black people to get guns for protection.

Smith said he was working as a human resources consultant a decade ago when he got the idea to form the National African American Gun Association, which helped the National Shooting Sports Foundation compile its report on communicating with Black consumers.

Smith encourages Black people to buy firearms for self-defense and get proper training on how to use them.

After 10 years, Smith said, his group has about 45,000 members nationwide. Single members pay $39 a year and couples $59, which gives them access to discounts from the organization's corporate partners, including gunmakers, and raffles for gun giveaways, according to its website.

The police killing of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri, and the shooting death of Florida teenager Trayvon Martin helped spark early interest from doctors, lawyers, and others in joining the group, he said. But interest took off during the pandemic, he said, even among Democrats who had resisted the idea of owning a gun.

"Hundreds of people called me and said, 'I don't agree with anything you're saying, but what kind of gun should I buy,'" Smith recalled.

Smith, describing himself as "quiet, nerdy, and Afrocentric," said criticism of guns misses the point.

"My ancestors bled for us to have this right," he said. "Are there some racist white people? Yes. But we should buy guns because there is a need. No one is forcing us to buy guns."

'American Amnesia'

During the pandemic, gun violence took its greatest toll on racially segregated neighborhoods in places such as Philadelphia, where roughly 1 in 4 residents live in poverty.

A city report says a one-year period in the pandemic saw more than 2,300 shootings, or about six a day. Many of the cases haven't been solved by police.

City officials cited the boom in gun sales in the report: Fewer than 400,000 sales took place in Pennsylvania in 2000, but in 2020 it was more than 1 million.

Gun sales have dropped since the pandemic ended, but the harm they've caused persists.

At a conference last year inside the Eagles' football stadium, victims of firearm violence or their relatives joined activists to share accounts of near-death experiences and the grief of losing loved ones.

Paintings flanked the stage and the meeting space to commemorate people who had been fatally shot, nearly all young people of color, under messages such as "You are loved and missed forever" and "Those we love never leave."

Marion Wilson, a community activist, said he believes the nation has forgotten the suffering Philadelphia and other cities endured during the pandemic.

"We suffer from the disease of American amnesia," he said.

Harris was on his way home from a job at Burlington Coat Factory nearly two decades ago when robbers followed him from a bus stop and demanded money. He said he had none and was shot.

Harris had spent his early life fixing cars with his grandfather, when he wasn't at school or attending church. He remembers lying in a hospital bed, overcome with a sense of helplessness.

"I had to learn to feed myself again," he said. "I was like a baby. I had to learn to sit up so I could use a wheelchair. The only way I got through it was my faith in God."

Harris endured years of rehabilitation and counseling for PTSD. As someone in a wheelchair, he said, he sometimes fears for his safety – and a gun may be one of the few ways to protect himself and his family.

"I'm mulling it over," Harris said. "I'm afraid of my trauma hurting someone else. That's the only reason I haven't gotten one yet."

KFF Health News is a national newsroom that produces in-depth journalism about health issues and is one of the core operating programs of KFF – the independent source for health policy research, polling and journalism.

Health insurance costs spike for businesses, workers after pandemic

By GRANT STRINGER
The Mercury News (TNS)

Jane Tyska / Bay Area News Group / TNS
A customer enters The Booksmith on Haight Street in San Francisco, on Dec. 24. Co-owner Christin Evans provides four of her employees with 100 percent free health insurance.

The cost of employer-sponsored health insurance in California rose at twice the pace of inflation over the past three years, squeezing workers' paychecks and small businesses alike.

More than 17 million Californians have health insurance through their job, according to a survey released in November by the health information group KFF. The average cost of premium payments for an employee's family plan rose 24 percent to $28,400 a year, the survey found. Meanwhile, the national inflation rate was 12 percent, and wages grew by 14 percent, KFF wrote.

Health insurance premiums have risen year after year for decades. But costs spiked after the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, driven by industry consolidation, increasing use of Ozempic and similar weight-loss drugs and other factors, according to KFF. Together, these forces are putting pressure on families and businesses, while some major health insurance providers in California continue to post profits.

"People are paying more and more, it's taking up more and more of their family budgets, and they're getting less," said Miranda Dietz, who leads UC Berkeley Labor Center's health program.

Along with rising premiums, more California employees also face increasing out-of-pocket costs. Workers bear indirect costs, too, Dietz said. As businesses spend more on health plans, they spend less on wages and other benefits, she said. She cited a study that concluded the average family with employer-sponsored health insurance would have earned nearly $9,000 more in 2019 if the cost of care hadn't increased disproportionately since the late 1980s.

Under the Affordable Care Act, businesses with at least 50 full-time equivalent employees must offer health insurance coverage that meets affordability and care requirements, or face fines. Workers and businesses split the cost, and in practice, businesses shoulder most of the burden: employers pay about three-quarters of a family plan premium, on average, and about 85 percent of single plans, according to KFF.

At the independent bookstore Booksmith in San Francisco's storied Haight-Ashbury neighborhood, owner Christin Evans said four of her employees qualify for health benefits. She said she covers the full cost of her workers' Kaiser Permanente care – one of her "top expenses" of doing business.

Her costs are rising, she said, by about 17 percent – to $3,250 each month in 2026 from $2,776 in 2025. Last year, premiums rose 7.5 percent, she said.

"Many small business owners will likely decide to cut benefit offerings and reduce wages," said Bianca Blomquist, director of the advocacy group Small Business Majority California, in an email. "While some entrepreneurs may even close up shop and go work for someone else, mainly so they can access quality health insurance."

Faced with high health insurance costs, owners could be unable to make other investments in their businesses, she said.

Matthew Rae, associate director of KFF's health care marketplace program, led the California survey. Between January and July 2025, KFF oversaw interviews with 460 employee benefit managers at companies based in California or with workers here.

In an interview, Rae pinned part of the cost spike on the pandemic, which officially ended in May 2023. During the worst days of the pandemic, in 2020 and 2021, insurance costs grew slowly as patients delayed serious care, he said.

Then "pent-up" need for care arrived, inflation nationally drove up prices and health care workers fought for better pay and benefits, Rae said.

In California, Gov. Gavin Newsom signed a law in 2023 setting separate minimum wages for health care employees, which reached $24 per hour at hospitals with 10,000 or more full-time employees this year. (The state's general minimum wage is $16.50 per hour.)

Meanwhile, more Californians began using expensive GLP-1s such as Ozempic or Wegovy to manage diabetes and lose weight, Rae said. The hospital industry became more consolidated nationally, he said, which contributes to rising costs by reducing competition. More than 400 hospital and health system mergers were announced from 2018 to 2023, KFF said.

Meanwhile, some of California's biggest insurers are posting profits.

An analysis by the Center for Media and Democracy, a Wisconsin-based nonprofit watchdog, found Kaiser Permanente put $27 billion into reserves in the last four years. The Oakland-based health giant reports several billion dollars of profit each quarter. Elevance Health, the publicly-traded parent company of Anthem Blue Cross, reported $1.2 billion in profit in the third quarter of 2025, up from $1 billion the year prior, the Wall Street Journal reported.

While health plan premiums rose for workers and employers over the past three years, the quality of the insurance declined. The KFF survey found that 75 percent of workers now have a deductible, up from 68 percent three years ago.

According to the UC Berkeley Labor Center, less than half of Californians in the private sector had a deductible 20 years ago. Rae said that it can strain workers and their families.

"There's a lot of worry about the affordability of plans for even people who are working," or who have a family member who is, Rae said. "You're pushing people past their assets, because the deductibles are too high."

At the same time, changes are happening outside of the employer-based health insurance market. The new KFF data arrived in November as public health experts and patients began to brace for a big shake-up in the individual health insurance market: the expiration of Affordable Care Act tax credits that have benefited enrollees since 2021. In California, monthly premiums for those plans will double on average, according to Covered California, the state's Affordable Care Act marketplace.

Self-employed freelancers and contractors, in particular, can expect major price spikes when the credits expire at the end of December. But small business owners and their workers make up half of all Affordable Care Act enrollees nationally, said Blomquist, of the small business advocacy group.

Not to be confused with banana water for plants, a DIY fertilizer made by soaking banana peels in water to extract nutrients, such as potassium and vitamin C, for your flora.
Dmitriylo / Dreamstime / TNS

What's the deal with … banana water?

By DEBORAH VANKIN
Los Angeles Times (TNS)

If a can of coconut water and a banana smoothie had a baby, it might be banana water. The latest plant-based hydration beverage on the market is being touted as "the peel good beverage" that offers "a bunch of nutrients." And it's drumming up attention on social media.

"Boyfriend says it has aromatics of slightly overripe banana," one Reddit user, leemoongrass, commented, adding, "It honestly isn't that bad."

"It smells like baby food," lsp2c said on Instagram.

Not to be confused with banana water for plants, a DIY fertilizer made by soaking banana peels in water to extract nutrients, such as potassium and vitamin C, for your flora. Or homemade banana drinks, such as hot water steeped with banana peels and strained, or blended banana smoothies.

The new drink, sold in supermarkets, is being marketed as an alternative to sports drinks, a sort of coconut water 2.0.

But some have taken to social media with questions: "How do you think you juice a banana?!" tybottofficial asked on TikTok, while unpacking a box of organic banana water from Woodstock. "I wonder if they're just in a factory, like, you know, really milking these bananas, I guess?" (He gave the drink a 7.5 out of 10.)

Both Woodstock and Banagua, leading manufacturers of banana water, make their banana water in Thailand from organic "Thai golden" and "Thai cultivated" bananas, which are shorter and stubbier-looking than the standard yellow bananas sold in most American supermarkets and which have a slight pinkish tint. The fruit gets pinker in the processing and the drink has a pinkish hue.

If you're a label ogler, the ingredient list will put you at ease. Banana water contains just one ingredient: bananas. There's no significant water added to it. A banana is 80 percent water, Banagua co-founder Rob Smithson says, and the processing of the drink (an "enzymatic process") separates the water from the pulp – the drink is slightly viscous but not pulpy.

Woodstock's bananas are steamed and mashed with "proprietary enzymes" to release nutrients. "Think of it as liquefied bananas," says Bruce Bruemmer, vice president of brand management at UNFI Brands+, Woodstock's parent company.

The upshot? Both companies say their banana water is especially healthy, brimming with electrolytes like potassium, B6 and magnesium, as well as minerals and antioxidants such as vitamin A and C. The drink has no added sugar, and zero fat, sodium and cholesterol, though a 330ml can does have about 13 grams of carbohydrates, slightly less than Naked coconut water's 14 grams in a container of the same size.

So how healthy is banana water, what does it taste like, and is it worth the hype? Here's the deal.

Manufacturer's claims: "Our banana water has 205 mg of magnesium – 50 percent of the daily value," Smithson says of Banagua's Original Banana, which went on the market in July 2025. "And it's especially hydrating – probably 2-3 bananas per can, which you can bring anywhere and you don't have to worry about moldy bananas. And just 50 calories – Naked's coconut water has 60."

Woodstock's 500ml can of banana water, which went on the market in March 2024, has just 80 calories. "Our Woodstock Organic Banana Water stands out for its great taste and natural hydration," Bruemmer says, "delivering 765mg of electrolytes – similar to many sports drinks – without any artificial colors, flavors or preservatives."

Nutritionists' take: "It's probably a sequel to coconut water," says Dr. Thomas Sherman, a professor of pharmacology and physiology at Georgetown University Medical Center. "It would appeal to people who are worried about animal wellness and saturated fat in their milk drinks or who are worried about too high sugar – so this fits the bill. But I question its effectiveness – these types of beverages offer such trivial amounts of electrolytes compared to what's already in our food. And it's expensive.

Sherman says that, in the end, it comes down to the consumer's intentions for choosing banana water.

"If you're buying it because of the taste, and you want to support a plant-based beverage, and [because] it's fairly low sugar, then fine," he says. "But if you're buying it because you're interested in getting more potassium and magnesium and calcium with low sodium, then it's silly because just eat plants, eat food, that's going to supply hundreds of times more potassium and calcium and magnesium."

Categorizing banana water as a sports drink is problematic, adds Vanessa King, a registered dietitian nutritionist specializing in supplements.

"Sports drinks replace electrolytes," King says. "The problem with banana water is that while bananas are very high in potassium, the electrolyte that you predominantly lose when you exercise is sodium – and it doesn't provide sodium. I would not choose it over a sports drink."

King points out that "banana juice," as she calls it, suffers from the same concerns as other juices: "It's more concentrated sugar without the fiber you'd get from the fruit version."

But any amount of potassium, magnesium, vitamin A and C – all key nutrients in banana water – is helpful, King says. "They're all nutrients that are generally under-consumed by Americans. But bananas also have those nutrients!"

The taste: We found it sweet and tropical-tasting, slightly viscous but surprisingly refreshing. However, we didn't go bananas for it.

Cost: Banagua's Original Banana (330ml): $3.49; Woodstock's Organic Banana Water (500ml): $2.99.

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FINANCE

Designer491 / Dreamstime / TNS

An emergency fund is a source of money for unplanned expenses that can crop up, especially when you have to go into debt to pay for these things, writes Greg McBride.

The best places to keep your *emergency fund*

By GREG MCBRIDE, CFA
Bankrate.com (TNS)

Unexpected events, such as an emergency room visit or a broken-down car, can result in major financial problems when you don't have an emergency fund in place.

It's not just about having some cash – ideally enough to cover at least six months of your expenses – set aside for those worst-case scenarios, though. Where you keep that money is equally important to make sure it's protected and immediately accessible.

If you don't have a fully-funded emergency nest egg, you're not alone

■ 16 percent of Baby Boomers, 24 percent of Gen Xers, 28 percent of Millennials and 34 percent of Gen Zers have no emergency savings.

■ 1 in 3 Americans have more credit card debt than emergency savings.

■ 60 percent of U.S. adults are uncomfortable with their emergency savings.

THE BEST PLACES TO PUT YOUR EMERGENCY SAVINGS

The best place to keep your emergency savings is in an account with a competitive annual percentage yield (APY) and easy access to your funds for when emergencies arise.

Here are the best places to stash your emergency cash:

How to keep your saving insured

You need to be able to sleep at night with the assurance that your emergency fund has no chance of disappearing, so safety is a key ingredient. Keep your money in an account with Federal Deposit Insurance Corp. (FDIC) coverage or National Credit Union Association (NCUA) share insurance coverage and avoid high-risk investments.

High-yield savings account

A high-yield savings account offers easy access to your money and a competitive APY to help your money grow. You can typically find high rates at banks that operate mostly online, as opposed to larger brick-and-mortar banks.

When choosing a high-yield savings account, opt for one that has:

■ No or minimum fees

■ No (or low) minimum balance requirements

■ FDIC or NCUA insurance

■ Convenient methods of withdrawal, including fast transfers from the account

Keep in mind that you may have a limit on withdrawals from your account, which is typically six per month, though some savings accounts do not impose these limits.

Money market account

Another option to store your emergency savings is a money market account. Like a savings account, a money market account typically offers a higher APY than a traditional savings account. With both, you often have easy access to your funds, within a potential withdrawal limit.

What sets a money market account apart from a savings account is that it often comes with a debit card or the ability to write checks, for even easier access to your savings.

Standard bank or credit union savings account

If you have a checking account at a bank or credit union that does not offer a high-yield savings account, you can still consider opening a savings account there for your emergency fund. This can simplify your financial life by keeping everything under one roof, while distinguishing your emergency fund from the one you use for your day-to-day finances. The downside, though, is that standard savings accounts often pay little to no interest.

A high-yield account protects your purchasing power; a standard one doesn't

With the best high-yield savings accounts paying an APY around 4 percent, you can earn interest to keep growing your emergency fund and preserve your purchasing power by outpacing inflation, which was 2.6 percent year-over-year as of November 2025.

Money market mutual fund

A money market mutual fund is another relatively safe place for emergency funds. Although they don't come with the guarantee of FDIC insurance protection like most savings accounts, these conservative investments are typically low-risk and easily accessible parking spots for cash.

That access will take a bit longer than standard bank accounts, though. If you need funds from a money market mutual fund, expect to wait for a couple of business days to sell and see the cash in your bank account.

THE WORST PLACES TO PUT YOUR EMERGENCY SAVINGS

Knowing where not to keep your money is an equally important lesson. While these places can serve a valuable purpose for your other financial needs, they aren't designed for emergency safekeeping.

Checking account

Lumping your emergency savings in with the checking account you use on a regular basis presents the challenge of making it too accessible. You run the risk of dipping into your emergency stash for non-emergencies.

Certificate of deposit (CD)

A traditional CD comes with a penalty for any early withdrawal of the funds. So, if you park your emergency savings in a one-year CD and wind up needing the money in four months, you'll forfeit interest and, potentially, some of your principal.

The stock market

With an average of an approximately 10 percent annual return, the stock market is great for a long-term investment strategy. But returns are not guaranteed and can vary. If you have your emergency fund in the market when it takes a downturn, you can find yourself in a very tough spot without enough money to cover your needs.

Savings bonds

Savings bonds are a good choice for saving, just not for your emergency fund. After purchasing a savings bond, you cannot cash it in for a full year.

At home

If you're considering keeping your emergency fund under a mattress or in a safe at home, it's time to rethink your strategy. In the event of an at-home emergency such as a fire or theft, it creates another dire emergency: Your cash will be gone – without any way of getting it back.

In retirement accounts

It's pivotal to save for both an emergency fund and your future retirement. However, it's imperative to keep these separate. Retirement accounts, such as a 401(k) or Individual Retirement Arrangements (IRA) should hold money you plan on using in retirement – not to pay for an emergency. Utilizing funds from a retirement account prior to your retirement can result in paying penalties, the loss of the benefit of long-term growth and make you less prepared for your retirement.

Bottom line

An emergency fund is a critical piece of minimizing your financial stress. As you work to build it, make sure you're putting that money in a place where it will grow and stay safe. And while you're at it, make sure you're regularly reviewing what you would really need in a true emergency. While three months of expenses might be plenty for someone who is 25 and living on their own, someone who is 35 and married with children will likely need a bigger cushion.

Frequently asked questions

■ Why should you keep your emergency fund in a separate account? Storing your emergency fund in a dedicated account can help keep you from dipping into the money for other purposes. Some savings accounts conveniently allow you to set up buckets devoted to different goals, including emergency expenses. A separate account makes it easy to be aware of exactly what you have in that account as well.

■ Why shouldn't you keep an emergency fund in a checking account? Checking accounts are designed for transactions such as paying bills or writing checks. As such, your emergency fund may be better off in a separate account where the money generally remains untouched. Checking accounts also tend to earn low (or no) interest, so your emergency fund could earn a higher return in a high-yield savings account.

■ What is the safest place to keep cash within your home? Because cash is paper, it's subject to damage from water or fire. For this reason, a fireproof safe is often the best place to keep cash at home. A locked safe can also help keep your money or other valuables intact in the event of a burglary.

■ When should you tap into your emergency fund? An emergency fund is a source of money for unplanned expenses that can crop up, especially when you have to go into debt to pay for these things. Examples include a large medical bill, a major home repair or a job loss.

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ENTERTAINMENT

Six ways public broadcasting will improve your life

And that's a promise

By ROBERT LLOYD
Los Angeles Times (TNS)

Community-supported media has had a tough year with the defunding of the Corp. for Public Broadcasting, created by Congress under the Public Broadcasting Act of 1967. At the time of its death, the organization provided grants to 365 noncommercial television and 1,216 radio stations. ("Ending Taxpayer Support of Biased Media" was the biased title of this executive order.) The CPB, it seems worth pointing out (again), was not in the content business; independent stations produce their own shows and/or acquire others, produced by other member stations, via NPR, PBS and various sources, free from interference.

In addition to government funding, amounting to some $1.60 per taxpayer per year (or 0.01 percent of the federal budget), the system has survived on a mixture of grants, endowments, corporate sponsorships and donations from "people like you." And if you are not already one of those people, this would be a good time to consider becoming one, by donating to NPR or PBS or directly to a favorite local station or show. Quality costs!

Here are six big reasons, encompassing dozens of little reasons.

Value for money

Conceived as a public good, community-supported TV and radio is broadcast for free over the air and over the net, where extra content, including short-form videos and podcasts, is often available. But a tax-deductible $5 a month to PBS gets you a "PBS Passport," which allows you to access an enormous archive of shows, new and old, from many producers, from many states, on all sorts of subjects – news shows, dramas, science series, live music, historical deep dives, multiple series about woodworking, gardening and home repair, and the cooking programs of Julia Child, Jacques Pépin, Lidia Bastianich and Ming Tsai, to name a few. (If you can't find something to watch or listen to here, you are simply an incurious person.) And there is the incalculable value of knowing that your money helps public media, and the creators it in turn helps fund, survive and thrive.

It's local

As a decentralized system whose channels and stations exist within the communities they serve, public media is a last bastion of local and regional programming. A quick search through PBS Passport reveals "Vermont Poetry," "Kansas Week," "Curling Minnesota," "Central Texas BBQ," "South Dakota High School Rodeo Finals." On the radio, Madeleine Brand's "Press Play" on KCRW, and "AirTalk" on LAist (aka KPCC), whose host Larry Mantle solicits calls from listeners, are morning newsmagazines with a hometown focus. PBS SoCal has mounted series such as "Lost L.A." (episodes on bootlegger tunnels, architect Paul Williams, historic Filipinotown, the Watts-based Shindana Toy Co.), "Artbound" (the Case Study House program, punk music in Chinatown, Duchamp in Pasadena, gospel in L.A.), "Coastal California" (public art projects reflecting local histories from Venice to San Rafael) and Roy Choi's "Broken Bread" (food as an instrument of social activism). Happily, it still airs episodes of "California's Gold" and "Visiting," from my man, the late yet eternal Huell Howser, that amiable, amazed videographer of our city and state.

It stands up for diversity

Formulated in part expressly to serve the underserved, public media stands for diversity, inclusion and equality, which, I am here to tell you, are good things. (Their opposites are not.) I'm enough of a cockeyed optimist to believe that exposure to different cultures, to ways of being in, looking at and talking about the world, can cure a person of prejudice. (And for those who are part of those cultures, representation matters.) The PBS series "Independent Lens" (2025 subjects included the history of funk, an Asian American high school basketball star, a Lakota dance and a camp for widows) and "P.O.V," a showcase for documentary films that personalize social and political challenges, take you places most television platforms don't bother to go. "The Migrant Kitchen," from PBS SoCal, explores our cosmopolitan food culture and the immigrants who create it. Cartoons on PBS Kids include "Molly of Denali," centered on a Native Alaskan girl, her friends and family; "Rosie's Rules," about a Mexican American 5-year-old living in San Antonio; "Alma's Way," about a Puerto Rican 6-year-old living in the Bronx; and "Lyla in the Loop," whose heroine is an 8-year-old Jamaican American. "Sesame Street," of course, is a marvel of urban multiethnicity.

You might – no, will – learn something

Public media is a home for scholarship, experience and expertise – a university of the air. Between "American Masters" – whose 2025 offerings featured films on jazz pianist Hazel Scott, graphic novelist Art Spiegelman, historian-philosopher Hannah Arendt, cooking writer Marcella Hazan, actors Marlee Matlin and Dick Van Dyke – and "American Experience," whose recent episodes looked at the Americans with Disabilities Act, the development of the Polaroid camera, fighting smog, and Henry Kissinger – you have the syllabus for a course in American cultural history. Add to that the works of Ken Burns and company, 44 of which are available via PBS Passport, from 1982's "The Brooklyn Bridge" to this year's "The American Revolution," with "The Civil War," "Baseball," "The Vietnam War," "The Central Park Five," "Country Music" and "The U.S. and the Holocaust" along the way, and you have the makings of a well-rounded citizen."Nova" serves up science; this year's shows include a two-part documentary on the building and life of the International Space Station and a timely look at superfloods. "Nature" brings the birds, bees, walruses and whales. And, on the radio, Terry Gross' peerless interview series "Fresh Air" catalogs figures who have shaped our times.

News you can use that doesn't use you

We could get into a long discussion about balance in media, but it's likely that many of those who accuse NPR and PBS of liberal bias don't actually watch or listen in a serious way. To be sure, one can argue with any news organization about its editorial choices, based on one's own preferences, but you won't find better informed, more reasonable, journalistically acute or ethical news and current affairs programs anywhere on broadcast or cable television (and certainly not on the Web, where standards are arbitrary, to say the least). There are panels, but no pundits, and no billionaires advancing an agenda or appeasing the White House. The PBS flagship news documentary "Frontline" posted its episode "Surviving CECOT" even as CBS was notoriously withdrawing a "60 Minutes" report on the subject.

Finally, it's fun

It's not all schoolwork. Entertainment, of a presumably worthy variety – which is not to say genteel or exclusive – has long been a key element in the system's programming and a cornerstone of its fundraising. The comic omnibus "Wait, Wait Don't Tell Me" and the storytelling series "This American Life" and "The Moth Radio Hour" (both produced by the PRX network) are prime comfort listening. For a long time public television was the sole entry port for British shows, and it still waves that Union Jack. "Monty Python's Flying Circus" was brought to America by a Dallas member station. (Raise a glass to programming director Ron Devillier at KERA-TV.) Under the umbrella of "Masterpiece," a cavalcade of mysteries, dramas, melodramas and multipart adaptations of classic novels have come to these shores. (This year brought "Patience," about an autistic detective (played by autistic actor Ella Maisy Purvis), and "The Great Escaper," the last work of Michael Caine and the late Glenda Jackson. The long-running period pieces "Call the Midwife," in its 14th season, and "All Creatures Great and Small," about a country veterinarian, in its sixth, have audiences as devoted as those for any tale of swords and sorcery. The juggernaut that was "Downton Abbey" was first presented by "Masterpiece."

Public media celebrates the arts, higher and humble – "Craft in America," highlighting workers in many mediums, from many places, is a personal favorite. An invaluable service in a time when the president targets museums (and national parks, and zoos) over "improper ideology" and has slapped his own name on Washington, D.C.'s John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts. The PBS series "Great Performances" fulfills an early, generally unkept, promise of the medium to bring the arts into every home, with opera, ballet and theater. This year brought Shakespeare's "Twelfth Night," with Lupita Nyong'o and her brother Junior as twins, along with Sandra Oh, Peter Dinklage and Jesse Tyler Ferguson; a new "Nutcracker" from the English National Ballet, and a documentary on pioneering Black opera singer Grace Bumbry. Listener-sponsored radio is traditionally home for music that corporate stations don't play. The PBS series "Austin City Limits" is a live showcase for all sorts of traditionally based American musics. On NPR's YouTube-based series "Tiny Desk Concerts," musicians set up in a corner of their offices and play unplugged for the staff; with guests ranging from Taylor Swift to Parliament-Funkadelic, Tame Impala to Silvana Estrada, it's a place to discover new artists and rediscover older ones – as potent an appearance as a slot on "Saturday Night Live."

All in all, these are great places to invest your money and, if you haven't got the money, your time. You'll be better for it; that is my New Year's promise to you.

Robert Lloyd has been a Los Angeles Times television critic since 2003.

beast01 / Getty Images

MOVIE REVIEW

Vertical Entertainment / TNS

Daisy Ridley’s Ava and Brenton Thwaites’ Clay embark on a dangerous mission in “We Bury the Dead.”

‘We Bury the Dead’ sees Ridley star in zombie drama with fading pulse

By MARK MESZOROS
The News-Herald (Willoughby, Ohio) (TNS)

‘We Bury The Dead’

★★

MPA rating: R (for strong violent content, gore, language and brief drug use)

Running time: 1:35

How to watch: In theaters Jan. 2

The first sentence of the tagline for the new film “We Bury the Dead” reads, “After a catastrophic military disaster, the dead don’t just rise – they hunt,” its official synopsis going on to use words and phrases including “catastrophic military disaster,” “quarantine zone” and “undead.”

Yep, this is a zombie movie.

However, no doubt at least in part to what appears to have been a relatively limited budget, this is more of a character study than a thriller based around heart-pounding encounters with hordes of mindless hungry types.

That’s understandable.

The problem is that as a character study, writer-director Zak Hilditch’s “We Bury the Dead” – in theaters this week – largely spins its post-apocalyptic wheels despite some nice touches and a game effort from star Daisy Ridley.

The “Star Wars” alum portrays Ava Newman, an American living in California with her Australian husband, Mitch (Matt Whelan). After a flashback introducing us to the seemingly happy pair, we find Ava in the Australian island state of Tasmania, where “the pulse” – a U.S. military experiment gone wrong – has killed many.

Ava has traveled there to join the Body Retrieval Unit to search for Mitch, who was in Woodridge, in southern Tasmania, on a work retreat at the time of the disaster. Traveling that far south is forbidden due to inherent dangers, but Ava intends to find a way to reach Mitch, who, with any luck, is alive.

However, while some affected folks have been awakening after the disaster, they’re not exactly themselves. If anyone in the BRU encounters any deceased showing signs of activity, Ava and others are told by a military man, soldiers will get to them quickly to put down the rising dead “with the dignity they deserve.”

Early on, Ava befriends Clay (Brenton Thwaites of “Pirates of the Caribbean: Dead Men Tell No Tales”), a long-haired, foul-mouthed, cigarette-smoking Australian with a far different reason for volunteering for the BRU. She makes a deal with him to take her south on a motorbike they find, which he covets.

They go about their way with only minimal issues – until they encounter Riley (Mark Coles Smith, “Hard Rock Medical”), a soldier who eventually offers to take Ava on the rest of her journey. Seeing the wedding ring on his finger, she chooses to trust him.

Without going into too much detail about Ava’s time with Riley,

Nic Duncan / Vertical Entertainment / TNS

Daisy Ridley stars as a woman searching for her husband after a military disaster in “We Bury the Dead.”

it’s safe to say that, as is the case with much zombie-based fare, “We Bury the Dead” traffics in the well-worn idea that humans living among the undead may be the real danger.

To be fair, despite the film’s tagline, Hilditch – who, according to the movie’s production notes, found inspiration for the tale in his mother’s long battle with cancer – tries to do something more soulful with his zombie offering. Through flashbacks, Hilditch (“1922,” “These Final Hours”) gradually peels away the layers of Ava’s relationship with her husband, paying off that bit of the narrative reasonably nicely in the third act.

For too much of “We Bury the Dead,” however, Hilditch saddles the viewer with bland dialogue and too few scares. Cinematographer Steve Annis (“I Am Mother”) gives the film an appropriately stark look, the sparse but haunting music of composer Chris Clark (“Elysium”) lands as it’s intended and the sound design of Duncan Campbell (“I Am Mother”) really hits home when the undead grind their teeth – it’s highly unsettling – but all of that goes only so far.

Ridley (“The Marsh King’s Daughter,” “Young Woman and the Sea”) is left to do a bit more heavy lifting than probably is fair to ask of her. For as promising as she seemed when introduced to the world as Jedi-to-be Rey in 2015’s “Star Wars: The Force Awakens,” she seems to possess only so high a ceiling and can’t find a way to elevate this so-so material.

That said, her time on screen with Smith is, increasingly, edge-of-your-seat stuff, a credit to the actors and Hilditch. Unfortunately, though, that’s as compelling as “We Bury the Dead” gets.

MOVIE REVIEW

‘The Plague’ has first-time feature director delivers disturbing horror

By MARK MESZOROS
The News-Herald (Willoughby, Ohio) (TNS)

‘The Plague’

★★★

MPA rating: R (for language, sexual material, self-harm/bloody images, and some drug and alcohol use – all involving children)

Running time: 1:38

How to watch: In theaters

Charlie Polinger achieves a lot with relatively little with his feature directorial debut, “The Plague.”

Getting a wide release this week, this slice of psychological horror is quite effective despite its small scale and a cast consisting largely of little-known young actors.

A cross between “Lord of the Flies” and … some other movie set at a youth water polo camp, “The Plague” explores, as Polinger puts it in his directorial statement, “the clumsy liminal space between childhood and adolescence, when the id grows too fast and too strong for the conscience to keep up.”

Also the film’s writer, Polinger found inspiration for the story when he unearthed old journals from when he was 12. He read his tales of a youth sports camp, where boys told tall tales of a mysterious “plague” that had infected one unfortunate kid – it was the reason for his acne-covered face and was turning his brain to “mush.”

That is the situation 12-year-old Ben (Everett Blunck) encounters when he joins the second session of a water polo camp after moving to the area from another city in summer 2003. A bunch of the boys – led by the charismatic Jake (Kayo Martin) – have ostracized another with a skin issue, Eli (Kenny Rasmussen), which they make very clear as they accept Ben into their fold.

“Those aren’t regular pimples,” Jake tells Ben as they sit on the bottom part of a bunk bed, several feet from Eli. “Those are plague pimples. That’s a plague face.”

Jake proceeds to fill Ben’s head with more disturbing details, including the fate of the unfortunate boy who supposedly gave the plague to Eli. (Spoiler alert: He’s said to be spending his time in a mental institution playing “Jenga.”)

Independent Film Co. / TNS

Kayo Martin portrays the trouble-making Jake in “The Plague.”

You can tell from Ben’s face that he doesn’t believe any of this to be true – mostly, kinda, probably – but he does as instructed, scrubbing his skin quickly after any physical contact with the outcast. He’s just trying to fit in, especially after Jake gives him a hard time about having trouble pronouncing “t” sounds, earning him the cruel nickname “Soppy” as a result. We’ve all been there – if roughly, not precisely.

That’s why “The Plague” feels so authentic for its first long stretch: It’s relatable in a way you may not enjoy thinking about, even if you were more follower than leader, more Ben than Jake, in your youth.

As the film progresses, however, Polinger skillfully blurs the line between childhood nonsense and reality in a really potent and, at times, downright chilling way, as Ben takes the inevitable turn away from Jake and toward Eli – despite the latter’s odd social behavior. (To be clear, Eli’s idiosyncrasies feel authentic for an outcast kid … at least for the most part.)

With the help of collaborators who include director of photography Steven Breckon, production designer Chad Keith and sound designer Damian Volpe, Polinger creates an aesthetic that evolves from lovely (the opening underwater shots) to unsettling (well, you’ll see).

Plenty of heavy lifting is also done by the aforementioned actors, with Blunck (“Griffin in Summer”) compelling as a preteen everyman – not exactly cool but able to vaguely fake it – and newcomer Rasmussen, who throws himself into the role of a boy trying to make the best of being separated from the group at camp.

The standout, though, is Martin, who, as the ringleader, straddles the line between angel and devil, aided by an often-present smile that can be read either way. (Also into skating and boxing, the youth has about a million Instagram followers.)

Joel Edgerton (“Boy Erased,” “Train Dreams”) portrays the only meaningful adult role, that of the boys’ coach, Daddy Wags, and he turns in solid work, both when his character lays into Jake for his behavior and later tries to comfort Ben.

Know that a viewer isn’t likely to find much comfort in “The Plague.” It isn’t a fun experience, the film dipping its toes into such upsetting topics as self-mutilation, but it is impactful.

Without hinting at the nature of the conclusion, Polinger sticks the landing, leaving the viewer wanting more – not of “The Plague” but of him.

TECHNOLOGY

TECH REVIEW

Anker dock makes it easy to connect peripherals

By JIM ROSSMAN
Tribune News Service (TNS)

My first computer was a Macintosh Plus, which was an all-in-one computer with a built-in black and white monitor.

Then I moved up to an actual desktop PC, with a separate color monitor.

Back then, laptops were expensive and not very small, and they used slower components and were not very expandable.

In the last decade, laptops pulled even with desktops and at my office, we've begun giving our users a laptop as their only computer.

We outfit our users two monitors and a wireless keyboard and mouse, along with a variety of other peripherals including scanners and printers.

If you carry your laptop home each night, you'll soon tire of disconnecting and reconnecting all your peripherals. In that case, what you need is a good desktop docking station, which is a box with ports for all your peripherals and just one cable that connects it all to your laptop.

I've been testing the new Anker Prime Docking Station DL7400 (14-in-1, Triple Display, DisplayLink) for a month and I'm impressed.

I've used more than a few docks, and this is the first one that has a display to show you what's going on and lets you change some settings.

Specs

The DL7400 ($299.99, anker.com or Amazon) can connect up to three monitors, including one 8K display and two 4K displays through two HDMI ports (4K@60Hz0 and one DisplayPort (8K@60Hz).

Ports on the back include two USB-A (5Gbps) and one USB-A (480Mbps) and one 2.5Gbps Ethernet port.

On the front you'll find three very conveniently placed USB-C ports. All three can provide up to 100W max, but charging through all the ports is capped at 160W.

Two of those ports can transfer data at 10Gbps and one at 5Gbps. The USB-C ports are for charging and data transfer only – they can't output video to a monitor.

The front also has SD and TF memory card slots and a headphone jack.

All of these ports connect back to your computer with a single USB-C cable.

Displays

There's one caveat with the DL7400 – to enable the display output, you'll need to install the DisplayLink driver for your computer. This software is mandatory if you want to connect monitors. The driver is an EXE file, so if you have a corporate computer and don't have the rights to install software, you'll need to make arrangements with your IT department to help you with the installation.

Management

This is the first dock I've used that has its own management app, called Anker Dock Manager, which shows you all the information about the operation of the dock and absolutely all statistics and status of devices connected to every port.

You can also use the software to upgrade the dock's firmware.

The DL7400 has an internal fan to keep the insides cool. You can see the fan status on the screen.

Design

This is a great looking dock. The 2.25-inch display can show you info on the connected devices and it can go into screensaver mode to show you the time and date.

You move through the on-screen menus with a small dial. Turn the dial either way to scroll and press it into select.

I'm used to docks being just plastic boxes full of ports that you can keep tucked under your desk or behind a monitor.

The DL7400 is designed to be front and center on your desk. The three USB-C ports on the front are perfect for charging your gadgets or connecting flash drives.

A dock is something that (hopefully) you'll set up once and forget it. If it doesn't give you any trouble, it's doing a great job.

But the DL7400 is changing my desk. Now I get to take some time to rearrange the wires on my desk so the dock can sit within arm's reach.

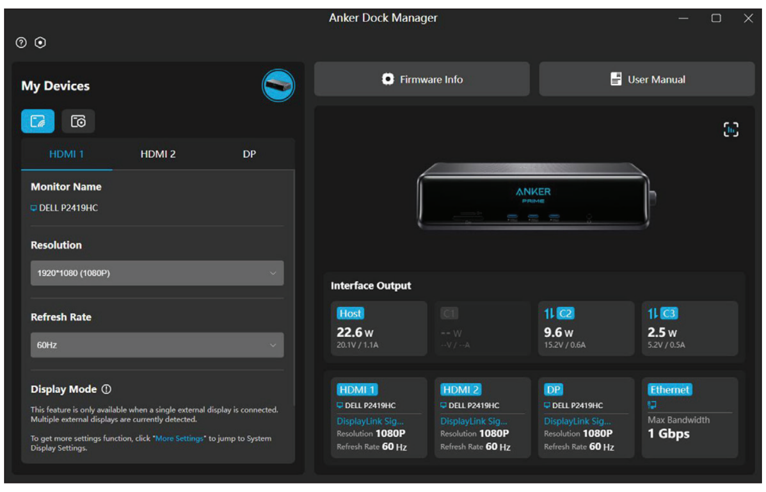
Worth it?

Who should be using the DL7400?

If you have multiple monitors, you want this dock. It has great support for up to three 4K displays. Most of the people I support at work have two monitors, if not more, and the USB-C ports on the front are very convenient.

I have a desk full of monitors and peripherals, and the DL7400 makes quick work hooking up or disconnecting my laptop each day.

Jim Rossman is a tech columnist for Tribune News Service. He may be reached at jrossmantechadviser@gmail.com.



Anker / TNS

TOP: Anker Prime Docking Station DL7400. **ABOVE:** The Anker Dock Manager app.

Spend those gift cards on these nifty gadgets

By GREGG ELLMAN
Tribune News Service (TNS)

I often refer to my gadget columns at this point of the year as "this, that and the others." It's a bunch of great products I just haven't gotten to this year. Nevertheless, they are great last-minute gifts or perfect for using a gift card on yourself.

The **BotsLab G980H 4-channel dashcam** covers 560 degrees of angles. It's designed to see in four directions, with superior quality: a 3K front, 1080P rear, and left- and right-view cameras. The front angle has a 170-degree view, the rear has 150 degrees, and the left and right have 120 degrees to record your trips without blind spots.

It is loaded with features, including a 3.18-inch touchscreen, voice control and a sentry mode for 24/7 monitoring while parked. Recording is done in endless loops, and night vision captures footage even in the dead of night. All recordings will include the recorded location, time and speed from the built-in GPS. With voice control, you can tell the BotsLab G980H which camera you want to see, and even have it take a still photo. Loop recording and storage are done on the included 128GB memory card, which can be upgraded to 512GB.

https://global.botslab.com/products/botslab-dash-cam-g980h-multi-channel-4-cameras, $289

BotsLab / TNS

The BotsLab G980H 4-channel dashcam covers 560 degrees of angles.

GooLoos GT160 dual portable air compressor and power bank is one of those devices you don't need, or at least you don't think you do, until you do. Then it's a lifesaver.

It's not far off from pocket size, measuring about 7.68 by 3.15 by 2.56 inches/2.02 pounds. Inside is a 10,000 mAh rechargeable battery, which, when fully charged, is rated to supply enough portable power to reinflate 36 car tires, 60 bike tires or 100 balls on a single charge. It has an auto-shutoff for tire inflation, along with USB-A and USB-C ports that work as a power bank to charge smartphones and other portable gadgets on the go.

With the push of a button, an LED flashlight shines and also has a blinking light for emergencies. A storage bag is included for the inflater nozzle hose and some accessories. A magnetic flap on the battery covers a compartment for a ball and pool floats inflater attachments. The front buttons control functions, and an LED displays tire pressure readings, battery level and other features. A storage pouch is included.

https://us.gooloo.com/products/gt160-dual-tire-inflator, $159.99

GooLoo / TNS

The GooLoos GT160 is a dual portable air compressor and power bank.

Skullcandy's Crusher 540 Active over-the-head headphones feature a 40 mm driver with adjustable sensory bass to help you get the most out of your workout. The fitness-focused headphones feature a clamp for a secure fit, a nano-coating for sweat and water resistance, and breathable ear cushions.

They feature Bluetooth 5.0, a flat-folding, collapsible design, onboard call, track and volume controls, and a 40-hour battery with rapid charging (10 minutes for 4 hours of playback). The Skullcandy companion app is ideal for personalizing your preferred sound and customizing the buttons.

https://www.skullcandy.com/products/crusher-540-active, $109.99

Skullcandy / TNS

Anker's Prime Wireless Charging Stand charges an iPhone, Apple Watch and AirPods simultaneously, with built-in safety features. The 3-in-1 charger not only looks like art and declutters your desk, it eliminates the need for multiple charging blocks and cables.

The 70-degree adjustable stand features Qi2 charging and 25-watt charging for a MagSafe-compatible smartphone, keeping it in full view for hands-free use. It will supply 5 watts each for true wireless earbuds and an Apple Watch. The 6.65 by 4.92 by 5.43-inch desktop charging stand features a built-in display that shows your charging status in real time. You can set your charging preferences, including charging modes, and your devices' power status in the companion app.

Anker's Aerospace-Grade TEC Active Cooling system pulls heat away and releases it through a fan, helping protect battery health and support safe, high-speed wireless charging, according to Anker. It performs over 10 million temperature checks daily to support safe charging and maintain battery health.

https://www.anker.com/products/a25x7-anker-prime-qi2-wireless-charging-station-25w-3-in-1-stand, $149.49, available in black stone or shell white

Anker / TNS

Anker's Prime Wireless Charging Stand charges an iPhone, Apple Watch, and AirPods simultaneously.

OXS / TNS

The **OXS Storm A2 over-the-head wireless gaming headset** with Hybrid ANC is a good choice at a buyer-friendly price. Gamers understand the value of having a single headset compatible with multiple gaming units, including PlayStation 4 and 5, PC, Nintendo Switch, PCs, laptops, and smartphones, via Bluetooth 5.4, USB-A Dongle, USB-C Dongle, and USB-C wired.

Each soft, padded earcup of the ergonomic, adjustable headset is constructed from breathable memory foam for long-term use. A 40mm neodymium driver on each side supplies top-notch sound for gamers or non-gamers like me, who just want to hear great sound from a playlist. It delivers cutting-edge 7.1 surround sound powered by Xspace audio technology, resulting in crystal-clear audio with the right amount of bass. A lot of this is credit to the Storm A2's active noise cancellation.

It's listed to last up to 70 hours before needing a recharge, which is ideal for a marathon gaming session. If the battery runs low, no problem – the Storm A2 will play while charging. A gamer-grade detachable omnidirectional boom microphone features advanced 5-mic ENC technology, voice isolation and wind reduction, ensuring those on the other end hear you crystal clear with minimal, if any, background noise.

https://oxsaudio.com/en-us/products/oxs-storm-a2, $89.99

Contact Gregg Ellman at greggellman@mac.com. Follow him on Twitter @greggellman.

Enable Wi-Fi calling if your house has dead zones

By JIM ROSSMAN
Tribune News Service (TNS)

I was recently talking to a friend who asked me if she should change her cell phone provider. She was happy enough with the service except for a few places in her house that never seem to get more than one bar of service.

Before changing service, it's a good idea to know which network you are using. In this country, there are only three – AT&T, Verizon and T-Mobile. All other cell phone companies use one of those three networks.

If you don't use one of the big 3 companies, you may or may not know which network you're using.

Visible Wireless and Total Wireless use Verizon's towers. Cricket Wireless uses AT&T, while companies like Mint Mobile and Tello use T-Mobile's network.

If you're switching because of poor connectivity, it won't do you any good to choose a new provider that uses the same towers you're using now.

The advice I gave my friend is to try enabling Wi-Fi calling.

If you have spots in your home that are cellular dead zones, you can ask your phone to use your home's Wi-Fi network for your incoming and outgoing phone calls.

Once Wi-Fi calling is enabled, any time your phone is connected to Wi-Fi (home, work, school), it should use that Wi-Fi network instead of cell towers.

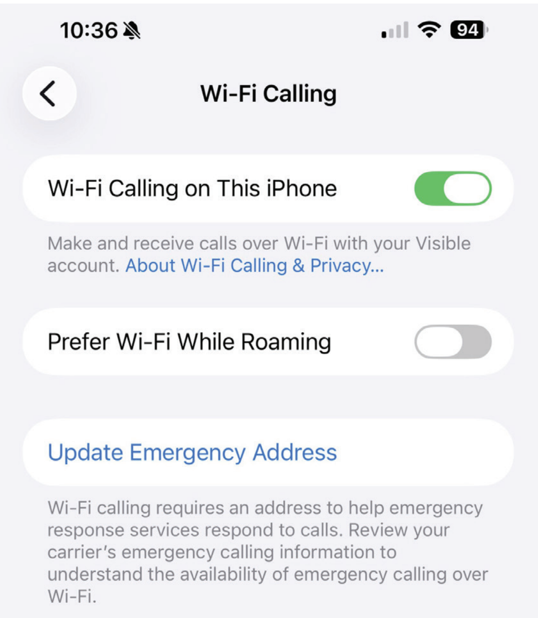
Actually, the phone should be smart enough to figure out which connection to use (cell or Wi-Fi) by itself once Wi-Fi calling is enabled.

To enable Wi-Fi calling on your iPhone, go to Settings, and then Phone and scroll down to Wi-Fi Calling and turn it on. You'll be asked to verify your emergency address, which is the location that will be shown to 911 operators if you call them using Wi-Fi calling.

Android users can open Settings and then either Network & Internet or Connections, then Mobile Network or Calls. You can also search in your settings for Wi-Fi calling.

Finally, it is possible your carrier doesn't support Wi-Fi calling. If you don't see the option or the button is grayed out, it might not be supported on your plan or with your specific phone. Check with your phone company to be sure.

Jim Rossman is a tech columnist for Tribune News Service. He may be reached at jrossmantechadviser@gmail.com.



Jim Rossman / TNS